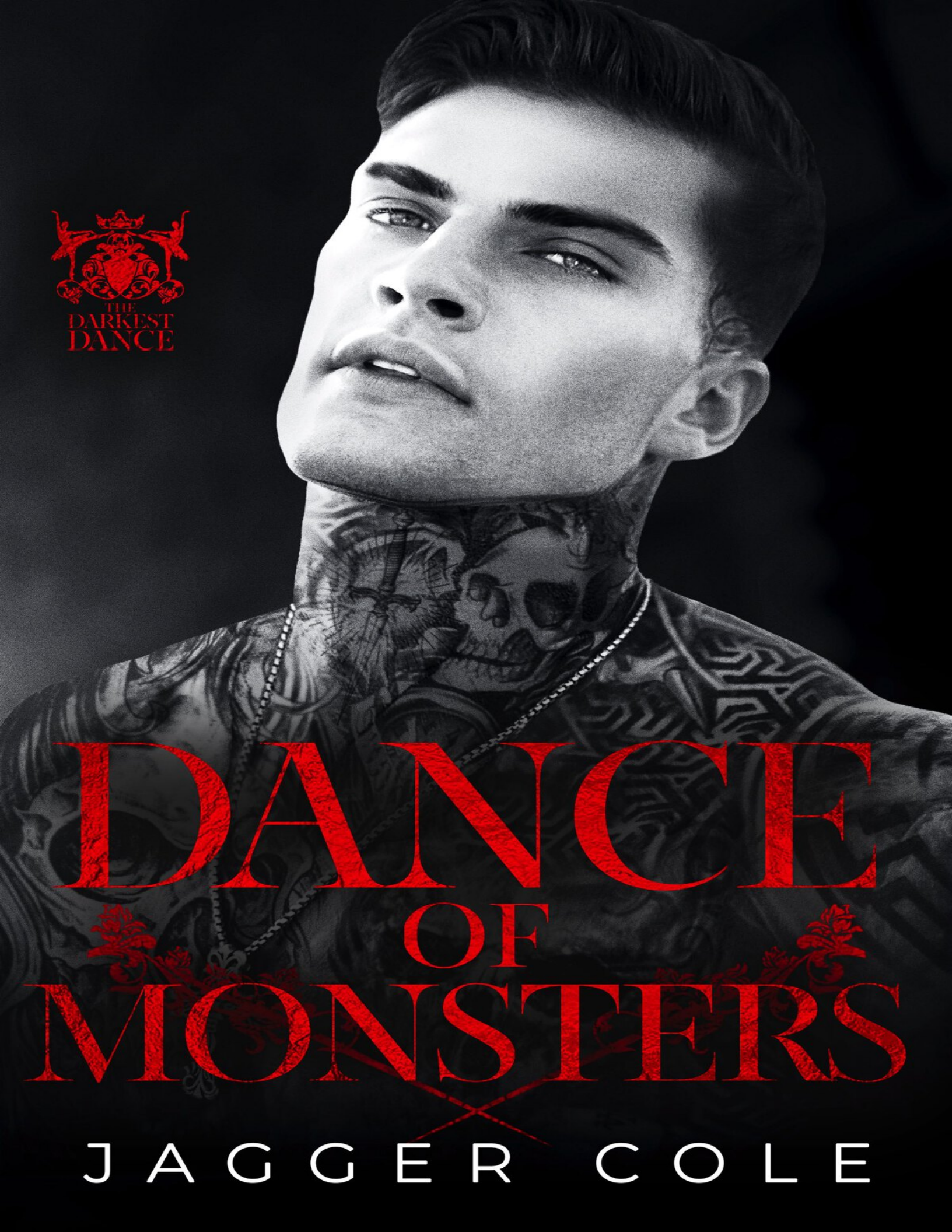
THE DARKEST DANCE
DANCE OF MONSTERS
JAGGER COLE

DANCE OF MONSTERS

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

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Baby Did A Bad Bad Thing - Chris Isaak
Gasoline - Halsey
Bad Habits - Ed Sheeran, Bring Me The Horizon
southbound - Artemas
OWN MY MIND - Måneskin
Volcano - Damien Rice
Idioteque - Radiohead
The Worst In Me - Bad Omens
Favorite - ORGAVSM
Where Is My Mind? - Pixies
pirate song - mehro
Liars - Gregory Alan Isakov
Run - Bring Me The Horizon
Hell Is Round The Corner - Tricky, Marina Topley-Bird
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Try Me - Ave Joe
Kjurrt - Ólafur Arnalds

Iron Sky - Paolo Nutini
Me, I’m Not - Nine Inch Nails
Daddy Issues - The Neighborhood
Underneath It All - Scala & Kolacny Brothers
Dancing In the Dark - Burce Springsteen
Monsters - Ruelle
Nothing’s Gonna Hurt You Baby - Cigarettes After Sex
Believer - MICHA
4am - Our Lady Peace
Save Us - Lennon Stella
Hi Ren - Ren

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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

Dance of Monsters, like many of my books, involves darker, graphic themes and elements.

This book contains CNC, impact play, somno activities of a highly dubious nature, BDSM (emphasis on the SM), and playing with sharp objects. This book also heavily revolves around mental health issues, childhood trauma, and addiction.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers and limits, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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1

EVELINA

When your back's against the wall, there's no measure to what you will do to survive.

Okay, that's a little dramatic for a personal mantra. I'm sure I originally saw it on some lame t-shirt or Pinterest page.

But in my current situation—feet rooted to the floor, jaw hanging open, and eyes wide as saucers as I watch what can only be described as an *orgy* unfold not fifteen feet in front of me—it's truly the only thing that comes to mind.

Remember why you're here. Remember what's at stake. Remember—

Nope. Whatever else I was trying to coax my brain into remembering goes out the proverbial window when I hear the urgent groans of carnal ecstasy mingled with the violent and wet slapping of sweaty flesh against flesh.

To say that I'm out of my element standing in the middle of a kink club, wearing a mask and *this* dress, watching group sex unfold around me, is, bar none, the understatement of the flipping millennium.

Remember why you're here.

Spoiler: it's not to watch masked strangers have sex in a variety of positions and combinations, some of which I never even imagined were a thing.

No, I'm here, in the sordid, moan-filled lounge of New York's most notorious and exclusive kink club, because I need help.

Heat creeps up my neck and face as I stare wide-eyed at the brunette being manhandled by two muscular, tattooed men on one of the couches in the center of the dark, elegant, seductively lit space.

Not *that* kind of help, thank you very much.

The sensation that I've just been caught doing something forbidden squirms and tingles up my spine like uncomfortable, clammy fingers.

It's not that sex *itself* makes me uncomfortable. It's just…

My face throbs.

Okay, maybe that's not *entirely* true.

On a bed barely ten feet in front of me, a blonde woman arches her back and buries her face in the sheets, screaming in pleasure as a big, built guy rams violently and mechanically into her from behind.

Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.

My pulse races. My palms feel sweaty at my sides as my nails dig into them. Despite the dim lighting, it still feels *way* too bright. Too hot. Too stifling.

Why am I like this?

I tear my gaze away from the moaning blonde, then yank it again to avoid watching two redheads writhe on a man covered in bratva tattoos—one grinding against his crotch, the other riding his face.

Again, this isn't why I'm here. I haven't snuck into Club Venom to watch orgies. I'm here because when you need to make a deal with the devil, sometimes you have to meet him in Hell.

Ugh, that came out wrong. I don't think sex equals damnation or anything. I've never been religious, and I don't view sex negatively, *per se*.

It's just…not for me.

But I'm also not asexual. I mean, I *want* sex. I think?

I have desires.

Sometimes.

I've watched porn and *taken things into my own hands*, so to speak.

On occasion.

But there's this mental block when it comes to viewing sex in a normal, adult way. Chronic embarrassment. Nervous awkwardness. Nagging anxiety.

My friends, though it comes from a place of love, adore teasing me *mercilessly* about this. The fact that I can't even say words like *cock* or *pussy*—I mean, *Jesus*—without blushing, and turn into a stammering mess whenever anyone starts talking about sex in front of me, even in the most vanilla terms.

The fact that I've managed to hit twenty-three years old without ever having had it…sex, that is.

That tingling sensation drags its way up my spine again as the pornographic gasps fill the room, which seems to be throbbing with its own sexual energy.

If my friends could see me now…

I cringe.

I'd die.

It doesn't matter that I—like everyone in the club—am wearing a Venetian half-mask that covers my eyes. It doesn't matter that I'm dressed more brazenly than I have ever been in my entire *life*. Or that I'm wearing a black wig to cover my blonde locks.

If I saw one person in this place that I knew, I'd spontaneously combust.

"There you are, beautiful."

My spine snaps straight, but luckily, no spontaneous combusting occurs. Because this one person here who *does* know me doesn't *actually* know me at all.

All the same, my body clenches and tightens, my skin prickling with anxiety as I turn toward the much older man with the paunch grinning down at me and reeking of vodka.

“Sooo…howsabout we go find a private room, baby,” he leers. “Unless you wanna be a bad girl and ride my dick right here for the crowd.”

Nausea surges inside me.

Remember why you’re here.

I reject the urge to run and instead force what I hope is a seductive expression to my face.

“You know what?” I bat my eyes beneath the mask. “Maybe I could go find another girl to join us for some *real* hot, steamy times.”

Some real *hot, steamy times*.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit one million, four hundred and three as to why Evelina Nikitin is a twenty-three-year-old virgin.

My idea of “sexy talk” sounds like something out of a Rita Hayworth movie.

Luckily, my date—and my ticket into Club Venom tonight—is *wasted*. Not just drunk. *Russian* drunk. That's saying something.

I met Oleg—or was it Olev?—outside the nondescript entrance to Venom about half an hour ago. Not by chance. I’ve spent a week canvasing the place from the outside, trying to figure out how I—obviously *not* a member of the exclusive, members-only club—could get in. I mean, it’s not like a gym where they’re giving out free trials.

A few nights ago, though, I spotted a couple of girls who looked about my age walking out of the club quite late, giggling as they made their way to a cocktail bar down the street. I followed them there, and while I might not do sex, I’m a pro at small talk. Which is how I found out that they, like me, weren’t members, but had both been brought as “personal dates” by older men who *were*.

Now, I don’t have a “sexy and alluring” bone in my body. But Oleg-Olev is drunk as a freaking skunk. All it took was waiting outside wearing the sexiest dress I own, flashing a little of my almost nonexistent cleavage when he stumbled up to me, and swallowing my nausea and saying “of course” when he asked me with a leer if I was looking for a “daddy” for the night.

I mean, puke.

But you do what you have to for family. You meet the devil in Hell if you want to cut a deal with him.

When your back’s against the wall…

Oleg-Olev grins drunkenly at me, sloshing the tumbler of vodka in his hand.

“Oh, you *dirty* little thing,” he slurs, breathing alcohol fumes in my face that make my nose wrinkle. “Lookin’ for a little backup to handle my dick, Vivian?”

It has since occurred to me after entering this place that the whole point of the mandatory masks is *anonymity*. But Oleg-Olev told me his name outside, so I happily told him my fake name: Vivian.

Because, again, my idea of sexiness is rooted in black and white movies from the 1940's and the first “femme fatale” name I could think of was Vivian Leigh.

I really do deserve all the good-natured ribbing my friends give me.

“Exactly,” I smile at him, watching the way he sways on his feet, his gaze unfocused. “So why don’t you find a seat at the bar, baby, and I’ll be right back to rock your world.”

Rock your world.

I mean, shoot me.

But again, he’s so drunk he probably thinks there’s two or even three of me. So he just smiles a messy grin at me before weaving his way over to the bar.

I exhale slowly as my stomach knots.

Step one was to get inside. Now comes the hard part: finding the devil and seeing exactly what part of my soul he wants in exchange for granting me the favor I need.

I take a slow breath as I turn to survey the X-rated scene in front of me. My face heats as I then look *past* the orgy, toward a hallway leading to what I hope are the private rooms and lounges.

That’s where the devil is waiting for me.

I edge around the perimeter of the room, making my way to the dimly lit hallway with the blood-red wallpaper and brass sconces.

Technically, the devil isn’t *waiting* for me. In fact, he’s not expecting me at all. I’m hoping that gives me an advantage.

I’m not usually intimidated by power. I was raised in one of the most powerful bratva families in the country. My father sat at the Iron Table along with the heads of several of the most powerful families in the Russian mafia before my brother, Roman, took over at the helm of the Nikitin Bratva.

But Vaughn Bancroft is a whole other level of power. Of darkness. Of danger.

Honestly? He scares me, and I’m not ashamed to admit it. Because that’s not being a wuss, that’s survival instinct. You wouldn’t apologize for being afraid of a great white shark you came across while swimming in the ocean, or a snarling, hungry wolf you found yourself face to face with in a dark cave.

But again, you do what you have to when it comes to family. Even the family you know deep down is poisonous to you.

And the smoke and mirrors with the wig, the mask and the phony name? It's not just so I’m not recognized by anyone here at Club Venom, or because Vaughn scares me.

It’s because Vaughn *knows* me.

And he knows me as Evelina the perpetually-in-pink, always smiling, innocent bratva princess, because his younger brother Val is one of my best friends. Val dances professionally in the Zakharova Ballet with me. He also happens to be dating my brother, Roman.

Evelina the Pink Princess is *not* who can meet with the head of the Obsidian Syndicate tonight. It's one of the most powerful, shadowy, and secretive criminal organizations on the planet. *That* Evelina would be laughed out of the room.

The very energy of the club thickens as I walk down the sultry red hallway. A door to a private room opens as I pass, and I gasp when a couple tumbles out of it: her carrying her heels, one of her dress straps slipping off her shoulder, him with his tie and several buttons of his shirt undone. I glance back at them and immediately feel my whole body stiffen when I see him press her to the wall and bury his face in her neck, making her whimper as she grabs his ass.

I don't belong here.

The two huge men in black suits standing outside a nondescript door would be enough of a giveaway that this is room I'm looking for. But I also know that the inner circle of the Syndicate is meeting in private lounge thirteen tonight because I *stole* that information.

Two weeks ago, Val left his phone unlocked on the edge of the stage after rehearsal. Me, being in full recon mode for my plan, took the opportunity to snoop for anything that might be useful. That's when I found the text from Vaughn to his younger brother, inviting him to this party tonight here at Venom.

Val's response: lol fuck no, not my scene anymore.

It's not my scene, either, by a freaking *mile*. But one of us *is* taking Vaughn up on his kind invitation tonight.

The two guards in matte black masks barely acknowledge me when I come to a stop in front of the black door with the brass number thirteen on it, along with a blood-red emblem of a viper—the sigil for Club Venom. I take

a shaky breath, feeling like I'm growing smaller as I dig my nails into my palms.

"*Arcana sub silentio*."

Secrets under silence.

It's the code word for entrance to the party, courtesy of more snooping in Val's phone. The two guards barely make a move. One of them simply dips his chin, reaches his arm out sideways, and twists the knob of the door before pushing it open.

"*Thanks*," I mumble. "I—"

Good *Lord*.

I don't know why I assumed the party for the inner circle of the Obsidian Syndicate, being held at a sex club, would be any different from the wildness I just witnessed out on the main floor. But I did.

And I was wrong.

Extremely wrong.

My breath chokes in my throat, my eyes blinking rapidly as I stutter to a halt with one foot through the doorway, faced with pure, hedonistic *madness*.

Threesomes. Foursomes. There's one girl on her knees at the far side of the room, totally naked except for her mask, surrounded by the *six* men she's… uhh…

Servicing.

With her mouth and both hands.

Holy. *Heck*.

A loud cry of pleasure rips my gaze to another vignette, and my jaw drops another inch or two when I find myself looking at two gorgeous women—one Asian with silver-streaked hair, the other a ginger with freckles across her skin, on top of each other in a sixty-nine position while two men fuck them mercilessly.

“*Miss*.”

I flinch, gasping a little as I wrench my attention back to the guard who opened the door. Was it just a second ago? Or have I been standing here staring like a psycho at this craziness for hours? I can’t see his eyes through the dark black holes in his mask, but I can feel them burning into me.

“Are you entering or not?”

“Entering,” I blurt, forcing my legs to work as I make my way into the carnal chaos of the low-lit room.

The door shuts behind me with a click, the finality of it making my pulse jump and my belly tighten.

What the heck are you doing?

Not everyone in the room is engaged in the X-rated display. Some guests, clothed, are standing by a dark bar, where a petite woman in a black evening gown is mixing and shaking drinks. Others talk quietly in armchairs, half observing the sex and half simply talking, as if this is a regular, normal thing.

Everyone’s wearing a mask, staff and guests alike. Even so, the second I see him, I know I’m looking at the devil himself.

Vaughn sits by himself on the far side of the room, lounging back in a deep, dark brown leather armchair by a crackling fireplace. One of his hands hangs lazily over the side of one of the armrests, holding a glass. The other hand slowly strokes his chiseled, razor-sharp, clean-shaven jaw beneath the matte black and blood-red mask covering the top half of his face.

He’s in a black dress shirt, open at the collar, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. It gives a huge view of the expansive collection of dark, twisting, malevolent-looking tattoos that swirl up his arms from his wrists, across his chest, and all the way up his neck to his tight jaw.

For one *insane* moment, I feel my brain starting to suggest I walk over to him.

Yeah, how about *hell to the no*.

Instead, swallowing heavily, I roll my shoulders back, pushing my meager cleavage out as I walk with as much Vivian Leigh swagger as I can possibly muster toward the bar.

The bartender dips her chin at me.

“Just soda water, please,” I say quietly.

She doesn’t move, and just keeps staring at me through the empty, soulless dark eyeholes of her mask.

“Um, vodka, then,” I mumble.

This time she nods, setting a crystal tumbler on the bar and then pouring a very expensive-looking vodka into it before pushing it my way, all wordlessly.

I thank her in a shaky tone, bringing the glass to my lips. I take the smallest sip possible, instantly feeling my throat tighten as the burn trickles over my tongue.

I barely drink. First, because it takes all of one glass of wine to make me giggly, and two to get me falling down drunk. But also because I don’t like the loss of control that comes with alcohol. It’s another of the things that my friends love to tease me about, especially Milena, who’s also Russian, and always jokingly threatens to “revoke my Russian card”.

But when in Hell, act the part.

A sharp cry yanks my head around, my eyes bulging when they land on the woman who just uttered it. She’s on her knees, straddling one guy who is madly thrusting up into her pussy. A second man crouches over her, and when I realize what he’s doing and *where* he’s putting his…thing…my blood turns to fire.

At the SAME time??

Holy moley.

I take another quick, tiny sip of vodka, ignoring the burning as best I can, hoping the liquor will at least take me down a notch from freaking out to

just plain anxious. Right now, I’m so out of my element that I’m not sure I could even speak one word to Vaughn.

But I have to.

You do what you have to for family.

I take one more awful sip of vodka, then turn my gaze back toward Vaughn.

Crap.

The chair by the fireplace is now empty. I dart my eyes around the room, vainly trying to spot him.

Shoot shoot shoot.

What if he left? Or what if he *didn't*, but it turns out he’s ditched his clothes to become one of the exhibitionists getting his freak on in front of everyone? What am I going to do, walk up and tap his shoulder while he’s screwing someone and ask for a moment of his time?

My pulse starts to jangle in wild, uneven staccato beats. My palms turn slick again as anxiety claws and twists inside me, laughing.

I squeeze my eyes shut, my breath coming too quickly as my heart begins to crawl up into my throat.

“I just have one question.”

Gasping, I whirl toward the deep, smooth and yet venomous baritone behind me. Then I go still.

It’s him.

Vaughn.

My whole world narrows until all I see is his icy blue eyes piercing into me like twin blades from behind his mask. His chiseled, hewn jawline. His regal nose and perfect lips, which are vaguely curled into a hint of an amused yet cruel smile as he towers a foot over me.

“*What* are you doing here?” he purrs in that same even-toned, deep baritone with a touch of smoke and rasp at the edges of it. The timbre is so

unapologetically in control, and his scent—a slight spice, mixed with a clean earthiness—is so deeply masculine that I feel my skin start to tingle, as if I'm standing too close to the sun or a god.

…Or a devil.

Every survival instinct tells me to turn and *run*. To put as much distance between myself and this *insane* idea as possible and then spend the rest of my life forgetting I was ever stupid enough to even consider it.

But something tells me he wouldn't let me get far.

So I swallow, take a slow breath, then force a calmness that I don't remotely feel into my voice as I smile.

"Mr. Bancroft." I dip my chin gracefully. "Such a pleasure to meet you. My name is Vivian—"

My brain shuts off even before my throat realizes it's being squeezed. My eyes bulge, my mouth dropping open in a horrified "O" as Vaughn's large, strong hand wraps around my throat and *tightens*.

"I'm going to ask you one more time, *Evelina*…"

The floor drops out from under me. My heart stops beating.

"What *the fuck* are you doing here?"

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2

EVELINA

It’s like watching a house of cards months in the making come crashing down at the first leisurely lick of a breeze. Like nailing all thirty-two fouettés in the Black Swan *pas de deux* only to lose your balance on the final relevé into fifth and break your ankle.

Every cell in my body screams in panic. Every nerve ending blares like sirens in my ears. Every inch of my skin quivers. But there’s no escape.

He’s not outright choking me, but the malicious intent is clear in the quiet, humming power under his fingertips as they leisurely stroke the pulse points on either side of my trachea. Icy, arctic blue eyes pin me to the spot, his head tilted slightly to one side as he looms over me, studying me out of bored curiosity like I'm a bug, or a briar he’s just plucked off the hem of his slacks.

Sweat sheens the small of my back beneath the shimmery gold dress. My pulse skips, heart tripping over itself as I stare horrified up at his masked face.

“I—no, my name is Viv—”

The whimper gurgles and dies in my throat as he applies just a hint more pressure with his fingers.

“Why don’t we try this again,” Vaughn murmurs quietly. “This time, let’s make a conscious choice to *tell the truth*.”

I shiver at the way his words ooze so sensually and effortlessly from his lips, while also carrying so much weight and power. At the way his eyes seem to be slowly peeling back first my clothing and then my skin to peer right inside me.

There's an unsettling calmness to him that sinks into my very bones and turns my insides to jelly. I swallow uncomfortably against the hand at my throat, my head slightly tipped back to look up at him as he towers over me.

He's so freaking tall.

I mean, I'm on the short side at five foot three. But Vaughn is *easily* a foot taller, possibly more. All it does is add to the throbbing, pulsing power that emanates from him.

His body is lean and yet clearly muscular, with broad shoulders straining at his black dress shirt and the obvious biceps bulging beneath it. Inky black tattoos snake and coil around his strong, veined forearms and up from the opening of his shirt from his muscular chest to his jawline.

This wasn't how this was supposed to go.

"I'm only going ask you once more, *Evelina*," he murmurs with a quiet intensity, his smooth, smoky voice wrapping around me like tentacles.

My larynx jumps against his hand as I dart my eyes to the side, trying to see how far we are from the door.

"No. That's a *terrible* idea."

My nerve endings spasm as his thumb presses against the throbbing pulse in my jugular. But that even, deep tone of his yanks my attention right back to him.

Up into those piercing, ice-blue eyes.

I don't say anything. I *can't*. All I can do is stare, transfixed by that cool, arresting look in his eyes.

He stays silent too, like he's waiting for me to make the next move. So we just stand there, him looking down into my face with ice in his eyes and the

animalistic, moaned sounds of screwing wrapping around us and turning my stomach into knots.

A slight glint sparks in his eyes, and the faintest shadow of amusement twists the corners of his lips.

“Are you uncomfortable, Evelina?”

The small of my back grows damper. My palms become clammier as I rub my thumb anxiously against my index and middle fingers.

“I…” I try to force a calm and ease I don’t feel at all into my posture and tone. But it’s a laughably useless show of bravado, especially when my voice cracks and a violent tremble ripples through my shoulders.

“The activities in this room. Do they bother you?”

I shake my head side to side. “*N-no*,” I croak.

His lips curl a bit more.

“Really? You’re *totally* comfortable with everything you see right now?”

I don’t even trust myself to open my mouth at this point. I just nod my head as his smirk spreads a little further.

“And here I thought we had agreed to tell the truth.”

His hand around my throat suddenly slides up to grab my jaw, twisting my head to the side and forcing me to stare at the scene barely five feet away. My eyes go wide and I stare in shock at the girl on her knees in front of a man sitting in a leather armchair, her lips wrapped around his dick, her mouth slurping up and down.

Holy crap.

Wet, slobbering sounds fill my ears, making me cringe. Tension twists and claws at my chest and arms, my very toes curling in my high heels at the wave of anxiety that washes over me.

I try to look away, but Vaughn’s grip is unyielding. I strain harder, trying to twist my face away from the sight of the girl’s mouth swallowing the thick,

rigidly hard penis, slick and glistening with her spit. But that's not happening, not with his hand holding my jaw so firmly.

So I close my eyes.

I have to.

It's…too much, right in front of my face like that.

Again, it's not that I don't like the idea of sex. It's just…right freaking *there*, and it's so shockingly on display that it's like the anxiety inside of me is turning to napalm through my veins. My eyes are still squeezed shut when I hear a soft, deep chuckle coming from Vaughn's throat. He pulls my face back around, and I feel deeply, profoundly pathetic as I slowly open my eyes.

"I believe the expression is *don't jump into the deep end when you can't swim*." His voice rumbles through my body as his hand slides sensually down again, wrapping around my throat in that same firm, controlled, non-violent way.

"I…"

Come *on*. Why the *heck* can't I make words right now?

Do you really need to ask that?

"This is the very last time I'm going to ask you this, Evelina," Vaughn murmurs in his low baritone. "What the *fuck* are you doing here? And do not insult me by trying to sell me some bullshit about you just *happening* to be at this club and *chancing* to wander into this room using a password you have no reason to know. Because I promise you…"

I whimper—legit *whimper*—when his hand squeezes my windpipe.

"*I'm not in the market for bullshit tonight*. So…" His eyes narrow, causing my pulse to spike. "Tell me why—"

"*I need a favor*!"

The sentence explodes like one long uninterrupted word from my shaking lips. Bored amusement glides over his features.

“A favor.”

I nod. “Y-yeah.”

“I’m all ears.”

I swallow heavily, his powerful hand still around my throat. My legs shake.

“My father—”

“No.”

There’s not a shred of humor in his tone when that single word stabs into me. His mouth thins, and he slowly shakes his head. “Absolutely not.”

An icy chill rakes through my body.

He doesn’t even know what I was going to say.

“*Please*, if I could just—”

“No, you could *not*,” he murmurs coldly. “I’m categorically not interested.”

My lips purse. “Please! You don’t even know what I’m going to ask!”

“I can guess,” he growls, his hand tightening a little more around my throat. “Your father, having been banished to Russia by your brother Roman, is having a bad time of it without power, money, or allies. Is that more or less it?”

My heart sinks.

I knew this was going to be a tough sell. Especially since—

“The same father, I might add, who got himself banished by said brother after he tried to *murder* Roman. Oh, yes…” His eyes narrow. “And murder *my* brother, too.”

Yeah.

That.

I’m not blind, or an idiot. I know Pavel Nikitin is a cold, often cruel, violent and bad-tempered man. I also know he was always hard on Roman—much

harder than he was on me.

And I know—*I know*—that whatever goodwill anyone in their right mind might still have for a parent like that should go up in smoke when that parent ties your brother and your brother's boyfriend up in a basement and tries to kill them.

But the thing is, whatever I have left inside my heart when it comes to my father isn't goodwill. It's definitely not charity. I'm not even sure it's love. It's just…*something*. And for the life of me, I can't seem to get it out of my system. I can't cut that last cord.

So that's why I'm here. Because six months ago, when Roman took my father down and replaced him as the head of the Nikitin Bratva, he only agreed not to *kill* our dad if he could banish him to Russia and leave him with nothing.

No access to the Nikitin bank accounts. No power. No allies to speak of back here in New York.

And now the wolves in Russia are circling.

Older enemies. Newer enemies. Neutral parties that see the opportunity for some street cred if they rip apart the deposed former king of the Nikitin empire.

And as horrible a person as he is, Pavel is still my dad. Roman's made it crystal clear that he has zero intentions of doing anything but applaud when someone inevitably kills our father, and the other mafia families in New York feel the same.

The Italians. The Irish. The Greeks.

I've checked.

Which is why I'm down to this last-ditch effort. Why I'm *here*, so far outside my element that I can't even feel the sun anymore, pleading with this man as my only hope.

Unfortunately, it's now hitting me just how ridiculously naive that hope was.

The Obsidian Syndicate is powerful in a way other mafia families can only dream of, my own included. They have allies and spies everywhere. Resources I can't even imagine. They influence world politics, banking systems, the very direction of history.

And the man whose hand is around my throat with a cruel smirk on his lips is the man who leads that organization.

"Am I getting warmer?" Vaughn says with dry sarcasm.

"*Please*—"

"No."

His arctic gaze narrows on me, sending my pulse racing.

"Don't worry, Evelina," he adds. "There is *one* favor I'm going to grant you tonight, because the pure balls it took for you to walk in here, even if it's quite clear you had no fucking idea *what* you were walking into, amuses me."

He leans down closer, his masked face filling my field of vision and his clean, spicy and masculine scent enveloping me like smoke.

I shiver as I force myself to speak. "*W-wh-what's the fav*—"

"I'm going to let you walk out of here…"

He leans all the way down, his lips barely millimeters from my ear. Then he steps right into me, his firm, muscled chest practically pressed against my body as his big fingers splay across my neck.

"*Alive.*"

My heart lurches into my throat.

"You not only knew about the party tonight, but you also knew the password that would get you through the door. Which means you were spying on my organization and stole information from one of its members."

"I…I didn't mean to—"

“I’ve *killed* for less than that, Evelina,” he murmurs against my ear, his breath teasing over my skin. My eyes flutter shut. My breath becomes labored. My head swims. The sounds of raw sex and wet thrusting fill my ears as my stomach knots.

“So, *you’re welcome*. Favor granted. And now, if I were you, and had any common sense in that pretty little princess head,” he growls, “I would *run*, not walk, away from this place, never talk about tonight, never even *think* about it, and never once look back. Furthermore, I would do all of that exceptionally quickly, before I change my mind.”

That’s when I bolt from the room, the sound of wet thrusting and choked moans still echoing in my ears.

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3

VAUGHN

"MOTHER. *FUCKER*."

Carson swears viciously, peering at his leg in the darkness of the garden outside the house.

Still crouched behind a low stone wall, I glance over to him. "What?"

"Just ripped my fucking pants on whatever country bullshit is littered about this hillbilly fucking place."

Next to me, Sebastian sighs deeply, rolling his eyes and cracking his knuckles. "So?"

"*So*, these are brand new. And they're Prada, asshole," Carson mutters, shooting him a look.

Sebastian exhales again and twists to roll his eyes at me. "Why the fuck do we invite Ken to these things?"

"Bitch, I will fuck you like Barbie," Carson hisses in the darkness, which makes Sebastian and me snort quietly.

"Dude, Ken doesn't have a dick, and Barbie doesn't have any holes at all."

"Then I'll cut new holes in you and fuck those."

"With *what dick*, Ken-doll."

I clear my throat. “If you two are done, could we shut up for half a second so as not to fuck this up entirely?”

On the one hand, being friends with these two is like living with toddlers on a perpetual sugar high. Or especially manic, leg-humping Jack Russell puppies.

On the other, I know I couldn’t survive without them.

The four of us—Carson, Sebastian, Gideon, and me—came up through the Syndicate ranks together. We got our start in the same warehouse in Queens, as low-level nothings packaging Syndicate narcotics for sale.

The Syndicate has a way…or at least used to…of picking up strays like us at a young age. Technically, I think Seb was the youngest. They found him when he was six after he ran away from some evil fucking uncle he was living with. That's where his particular brand of malice and brutality comes from.

I was seven and, along with my younger brother Val, was also running from a broken home when the Syndicate found us.

Carson, manic prince of darkness that he is, came next, maybe a year after Val and me. His parents decided a kid with his “issues” was too much for people of their lofty social stature and had him committed to a mental hospital. He was there nine months before he got tired of getting the shit kicked out of him by sadistic adults and escaped, leaving a trail of blood behind him.

Then came Gideon. As close as we are to him, not one of us knows his story.

And none of us, not even Carson, is crazy enough to ask.

“Okay, then riddle me this,” Carson sighs. “Where do baby Barbies and Kens come from if there are no dicks and pussies in the Barbie-verse?”

“Do you *ever* take a single millisecond to review the shit that pops into your damaged head before letting it fall out of your mouth?” Sebastian grunts.

“No, because that would be boring,” Carson shrugs in response.

To be clear, Carson is a fucking lunatic. But then, so are the rest of us, at least to varying degrees. It's probably why we became friends in the first place, and why we still are over ten years later.

Ten years from starting at the bottom as damaged goods to being at the very fucking top of the pile.

If we're being honest, the driving factor was me. Maybe it's something I was born with, but the second I found myself part of the Syndicate and embraced by this strange, shadowy, old-world brotherhood of a family, there was no limit to my ambition.

I've always been like that. I don't just dip my toes in. It's all or nothing.

And that's how a runaway from a broken home in McKeesport, Pennsylvania with drug addict parents went from packing baggies of coke and pills to being an enforcer. To joining the secretive intelligence wing of the Syndicate. To being invited to bigger tables at more important meetings. Until eventually I was second to the Marquis himself, which is the title given to the head of our organization.

The problem is, when you've spent your whole life in a certain world, with a found family you've bled and would die for, the one thing you can't abide is *rot*.

And Étienne Veyrac, the former Marquis, was rotten to the core.

Corrupt. Self-serving. A poison running through the very organization that took me in and gave me a place in this world.

Plus, like I said, for better or worse, there is no limit to my ambition.

So I just…took it all.

A year ago, I had Étienne killed and assumed command of this ancient brotherhood. I brought my motley crew of psychopaths along for the ride to the top with me, and the three of them now act as my close advisors and inner circle.

Yes, at times it's like trying to run an empire alongside leg-humping puppies.

I also wouldn’t change a single thing about any of it.

“Anyway, I feel the need to voice my displeasure, again, at your lack of concern for my pants.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Sebastian rumbles, rolling his broad shoulders as he shoots Carson a look. “Have you forgotten that you’re a multi-millionaire now?”

Multi-multi-*multi*-millionaire, if we’re keeping score.

“Just buy some new fucking pants and stop crying like a little bitch about it.”

“*P-R-A-D-A*, you uncultured bag of shit,” Carson grunts.

“Don’t give an F-U-C-K, shrimp dick,” Seb shoots back.

“Is that a desperate plea to see my hard cock, Seb?” Carson grins maniacally, grabbing his crotch and making a stroking motion.

“Try it and see what happens to your face,” Sebastian growls, starting to stand.

“You want me to *what* on your face?”

Jesus fuck. Time to cut this bullshit short.

I plant a hand on Sebastian’s broad chest and gently push him back down. “You know he feeds off the attention. Just stop giving it to him.”

Sebastian’s jaw clenches, and he glares at Carson over my shoulder. “You take your dick out and I’m going to rip it off and beat you with it.”

“How about *nobody* takes his dick out and we stop talking like we’re at a fucking football game.”

Christ.

The three of us whirl when we hear Gideon’s voice.

“Fuck *me*,” Carson groans, shoving his fingers through his blond hair and glaring at our quiet, eternally broody friend who’s just appeared like a

fucking apparition out of nowhere. “Will you stop doing that?”

Gideon’s dark brow furrows. “Doing what?”

“The fucking jump-scare shit!” Carson hisses. “For *once*, could you just announce your presence like a normal human being?”

“That's what I did.” Gideon shrugs and then nods his chin at Carson. “Your pants are ripped.”

“*No shit, Sherlock*,” Carson grumbles.

“That’s what you get for wearing designer shit in the goddamn countryside,” Seb snickers under his breath.

“*Fuck* this hillbilly place,” Carson mutters, glaring again at the rip in his pants.

I glance at Gideon and we both shake our heads wearily. Carson and Sebastian might be city kids, but Gideon and I clearly agree that coastal southern Connecticut, aka The Gold Coast, is hardly “the countryside”. And ten-thousand-square-foot designer homes set on four acres of manicured grounds and gardens are not *close* to “hillbilly shit”.

Carson sighs. “Remind me why *we’re* here now that you’re the king and all? Don’t you have underlings for shit like this? And, hey, speaking of underlings, when do I get some of my own?”

“You’re welcome to go wait in the car whenever you like,” I grunt.

“Or just, you know, not come,” Sebastian adds with a grin.

Carson flips him off, and Sebastian chuckles as he wraps a muscled arm around our friend's shoulder and taps his forehead to his.

“To remind you, we are doing ‘shit like this’ because it’s fucking *fun*.”

Carson brightens. “Oh yeah, there’s that.”

Seb’s right.

All four of us are different flavors of fucked up and broken. But one thing that we have in common is a *deep* appreciation of, and fondness for, blood

and violence.

Sorry-not-sorry.

I glance at Gideon. “Anything?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. Just the one security guard at the front gate, like we already knew. And Miss O is going to text when things are set up there. No surprises.”

No surprises is *always* my preference.

My mind has started to wander when Gideon quietly clears his throat.

“Speaking of surprises…”

I glance at him. “Yes?”

A faint smirk hovers in the shadows of his mouth, his stormy blue eyes glinting in the moonlight as he pushes his dark hair away from his face.

“Are we going to talk about the surprise attendee at the party the other night?”

Yeah, go ahead and add that to the list of reasons why Gideon, much as I love him, can creep me the fuck out. It’s like the motherfucker can read your goddamn mind sometimes. Because yes, that's precisely what…or should I say *who*…my thoughts had been wandering to just now.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re—”

“Vaughn.”

I exhale as he looks at me impassively. “What.”

“I know you’re the king, and believe me, I have no interest in your throne. And these two…” He nods his chin past me to Carson and Seb, arguing about how exactly it is that babies come into existence in the Barbie-verse, pointing out that Barbie’s little sister, Skipper, actually comes with a baby to look after.

Like, this is an actual conversation two grown men are having out loud.

“I think they’re just happy to be here,” Gideon murmurs quietly. He cocks a brow at me. “But who the fuck was she?”

“Who was who?”

“The girl King V. here had his hands on at the party the other night,” Seb grunts. I glance over to see that he and Carson are now finished their deep philosophical discussion concerning procreation in the Barbie-verse.

“Hi, yes, I have a question,” Carson says, raising his hand before turning to Sebastian. “Why in fuck where you looking at Bancroft during an orgy?” He smirks. “Shit, is this a love that dare not speak its name situation?”

Sebastian rolls his eyes and flips Carson off, then glances back at me. “I’m curious, too. Spill. I didn’t recognize her at all.”

“That’s because she’s not Syndicate,” Gideon adds slowly, his voice low and laced with suspicion.

“Oh shit, the plot thickens,” Carson growls, his eyes narrowing.

I shake my head. “She's…no one of consequence.”

“Yeah, but how’d she even get in the room?” Sebastian scowls.

“She used a guest password.”

I’d like to say I pushed all thoughts of Evelina Nikitin out of my head the very second I scared her off the other night before proceeding to lose myself in a harem of pussy.

But I did not.

Any of it.

Instead, I questioned the men at the door about the woman who’d just left. That's how I found out she used the guest password, *arcana sub silentio*, not the Syndicate members password. Which also means I figured out how the fuck she *got* that password, thank you very much Val for not locking your fucking phone.

So yeah, that's how she knew about the party to begin with. But it still leaves one mystery:

Why the *hell* did she come to me?

I mean, yes, I know her basic reason. It would have been easy enough to deduce even if she hadn't told me. Six months ago, after Pavel Nikitin tried to kill his own son and my brother, Roman took the throne and had Pavel banished to Russia. If it were me, I would have simply cut off his fucking head, but I can appreciate complicated relationships with one's father.

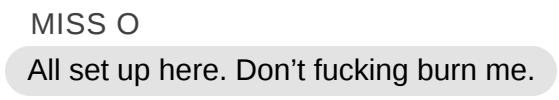
So that's why she ostensibly needs help: because Pavel is walking around Moscow without power or money, with a *gigantic* target on his back.

That still doesn't explain why his princess ballerina of a daughter is sneaking into Syndicate parties at members-only kink clubs to ask *yours truly* for help, though.

My jaw tightens and my eyes narrow as I replay the feel of her pulse twitching under my fingertips. The softness of her skin. The delicious tremble of her fear. The faint scent of lilac and vanilla when I leaned close to her ear.

"Vaughn."

I drag myself away from that particularly distracting train of thought and glance at Gideon. He's holding up his phone, showing a text that's just come in:



Dark hunger flexes and cracks its neck inside me, and I turn to grin at my friends. "Go time."

"Fuck *yes*," Sebastian groans with a genuine undertone of sexual excitement in his voice.

"Think I just came," Carson grins in the darkness.

The four of us make our way silently past the garden wall, through the rose bushes, around the pool, and finally into the huge house via the back door that Miss O was kind enough to leave open for us.

“*Who wants to do improv with Miss O?*” I hiss as we pause at the bottom of the grand staircase.

“Not it,” Carson mutters, touching his nose. Gideon shakes his head quickly.

“Fuck, I’ll do it,” Sebastian grunts. “She doesn’t scare me.”

“That’s because you weren't there the night she helped us set up that Swedish diplomat,” Carson spits, making a face. “You missed the horror show of watching her stomp on the poor dude’s nuts.” He gulps. “In fucking *stilettos*.”

We creep single file up the stairs, pausing in the hallway outside a bedroom where we can hear a wooden paddle slapping against bare skin, followed by the giddy groans of a man.

I glance at Seb and nod.

Showtime.

Sebastian bursts through the door first, yelling like a fucking madman. The man chained to an iron Saint Andrew's cross on the wall immediately shits himself, screaming in terror around the ball-gag stuffed into his mouth. Miss O, true professional that she is, makes a *great* show of dropping her sadistic Hard Domme facade and screaming in what truly sounds like fear when Sebastian grabs her around the waist and starts bellowing about “burying her in the woods” as he drags her from the room. She does manage to sneak in a quick wink at me on the way out.

That leaves Carson, Gideon, and me alone with one Cyril Weathers.

Wearing a cock cage.

“My my my,” I sigh, rolling my neck and slowly pulling a gleaming knife out of my coat. “This, Cyril, is what they call being up a shit creek without a paddle.”

“But literally,” Carson says, his nose wrinkling as he waves a hand in front of his face and nods at the actual shit Cyril just deposited on the floor beneath his spread and bound legs.

I walk over to the chained man. He whimpers pathetically as I slide the tip of my knife up his cheek, slipping it under the leather strap of the ball gag. With a flick of my wrist, the strap is severed, letting the gag and a mouthful of Cyril's spit dribble down his bare chest.

"Bancroft!" Cyril squeaks, his initial terror subsiding a little. I watch as it slowly morphs into a delightful mix of shame, a different kind of fear, and a horrified realization of what's unfolding around him.

"Wh-what's the meaning of this!?" he blurts, desperately trying to appear angry…which, let's be real, is pretty hard to do when your dick is locked in a cage and there's shit running down your legs.

"This, Cyril, is your official notice." I smile. "If you recall, the last time we spoke, you were *not very nice* when it came to sharing your views about me joining the board of directors of Knightsblood."

Cyril sits as treasurer on the board of directors for Knightsblood University, one of the mafia world's greatest little secrets.

Knightsblood, barely ten miles from where we are right now, is basically the mafia version of Harvard, Yale and Princeton all rolled into one. A very old-school, old-money, exclusive-as-*fuck* "ivy league for the underworld", where the heirs and offspring of Russian *pakhans*, mafia dons, kingpins, Yakuza *oyabuns*, and more come to get a world-class education.

…And also make the connections they'll need later when they eventually ascend their respective thrones back home.

I never went to college. Neither did Sebastian, Carson, or Gideon. So my desire to join the board of directors has nothing to do with "revisiting my youth" or "giving back to the college" or any of that bullshit.

Like everything I do, it comes from a place of *ambition*.

Soon, one of the current board members, Andrés Torvallés, heir to the *hugely* powerful Torvallés family in Spain, is going to be…*resigning*. I already have the rest of the members in my pocket, who will gladly vote me onto the board, Then it's just a short step to becoming chairman of that board. But a vote for chairman has to be unanimous.

And I am *going* to be chairman.

Again, this isn't because I secretly harbor a deep love of meetings and paperwork. It's because when I see Knightsblood, I see opportunity.

The most powerful criminal organizations on earth are not the ones you've heard of, or who get turned into movie tropes. The Comorra. The Bratva. The Cartel. These are obviously powerful, insanely well financed groups.

But the real power is bigger than petty crime, trafficking, and getting muddied in the street-level dramas of organized crime. Entities like the Torvallés or d'Auvrelle families have been around for *centuries* and influence global politics and history.

That is real power. But getting there means evolving.

That's where inserting myself into position of power within Knightsblood comes into play.

If I control the board, it means I control the university. It means that I can influence the future of the underworld on a global scale. It gives me a monopoly on information, with access to all *sorts* of normally confidential information regarding some of the most powerful mafia families on the planet.

It means I become a powerbroker on a scale almost never before seen in the criminal underworld.

So that's why I need onto the board of directors for Knightsblood. And right now, it's only Cyril standing in my way.

Killing him would be *far* easier. But given that Andrés will be…*departing* the board very shortly, very abruptly, another member doing the same would start to raise questions I don't need asked.

So we're doing it this way.

Cyril's face pales. "Look, Vaughn, I'm sorry, okay?! It wasn't a personal attack, I just don't feel that the college needs to entangle itself with—"

"Oh, you've made your thoughts on the matter crystal clear," I say, smiling icily at him. I turn to Carson. "Mr. Photographer, I believe our model is

ready for his close-up."

Carson makes a face. "Fuck that, I don't want this shit on my phone."

"As if that would be the worst thing your phone ever saw," Gideon grunts. "Fine, I'll do it."

He pulls his phone out and starts snapping pictures of a naked, shit-streaked, cock-caged Cyril, bound to a BDSM cross.

"*Jesus Christ*," Cyril chokes as he starts to cry.

"I sincerely doubt the Father, The Son, *or* The Hole Spirit wants to be involved in any of this," I say with a wry smile. "Now, you know what this means, right?" I step closer. "In case you're unclear, the answer is, it means you're fucking *mine* now."

Cyril looks pathetic and broken as he lifts his eyes to mine. "Or…or you'll tell my wife?"

I smile and shake my head. Then I sigh, reaching out and patting his cheek patronizingly. "You think my threat is ending your marriage? No, Cyril." I shake my head again and then bring my knife up. Cyril whimpers as I lift his chin with the tip of the blade. "If you step out of line, I won't tell your wife about your kinky proclivities and your night with a Dominatrix."

I lean closer, letting him inhale my darkness as I loom right in his face.

"I'll cut your wife into little pieces in front of you and *feed her to you one bite at a time*."

It's not until we're heading back to the city that I allow myself to admit that as much fun as that was, there's been something else taking up massive amounts of real estate in my head.

Some*one* else.

Someone who never should have come to that party the other night with her pathetic request for help, and thereby gotten my attention.

Evelina Nikitin might think I'm a monster. And she'd be right.

But she doesn't know the fucking *half of it*.

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4

EVELINA

Wow, this place is beautiful.

Part of me has always wished I'd gone to Knightsblood, like Roman and his friends. Not *just* because the centuries-old Tudor and Gothic campus nestled on a wooded cliff on the southern Connecticut shore is gorgeous—though it is.

But also, I've often wondered what I missed by skipping the traditional college experience…if you can call a school where the heirs of mafia families prepare for their ascension to various thrones a "traditional college experience".

I mean, yes, part of any elite college experience is the connections you make. That's the whole point of schools like Harvard or Princeton or Eton: not just the superior teaching staff and resources, but also the opportunity to rub elbows with other students of a similar status and background. Love it or hate it, the world really does revolve around *who*, not what, you know.

Back when Knightsblood was founded, it wasn't actually a school for the offspring of criminal dynasties. Initially, the idea was to create a "truly English" university in the United States for the heirs of lords, dukes, and other high-born families who were coming here from England. Those lords and dukes wanted a school for their kids that would match Oxford or Cambridge for prestige, with admission limited to those of aristocratic lineage.

Obviously, things have changed since then. It’s still a fiercely selective school, but these days, it caters to the heirs of a different *kind* of aristocracy.

Even so, the original school motto remains the same: “To the blood of king and crown, cross and knighthood.”

Hence, Knightsblood.

I could have gone here. I mean I literally applied, and got in. But university entrance age is also right around the time you start auditioning for companies if you're an aspiring dancer. So I had to make a choice: Knightsblood or ballet.

In the end, my love of dance won.

Ironically, ballet is the main reason I’m on the Knightsblood campus today. A few months ago, Madame Kuzimina, the enigmatic and at times terrifying Artistic Director of the Zakharova, was contacted by the performing arts department here at Knightsblood. They wanted to elevate their dance program, and did Madame K have any dancers who might be interested in coming bi-weekly to teach professional level ballet to a few select students?

Why yes, yes she did.

Enter Evelina, stage left.

Part of it was that I’d always had these lingering thoughts about “what might have been” if I’d come here. I definitely wouldn’t be a dancer, so it’s honestly not a decision I agonize over. But I also leapt at the opportunity when Madame Kuzmina asked me about it because lately, I’ve needed some space at home.

From Roman.

Don’t get me wrong: I love my brother more than anything in the world. But things…*changed* between us after what happened with our dad.

For one, a few months ago, Roman moved back to the main house. I’d never left home when I stayed in New York to dance for the Zakharova. Why would I? It’s a gorgeous, enormous mansion, and besides, it’s not like I needed privacy to party or bring boys home.

I mean, *come on*.

Dad also traveled a lot for both business and pleasure, so I frequently had the house to myself, too.

But then Dad was sent to Russia, and Roman moved back in.

With Val.

Now, again, do *not* get me wrong. I love them both dearly. And on paper, living in a huge, glamorous house with my big brother and his incredible boyfriend who also happens to be one of my besties is a dream scenario.

And it is. On paper.

Most of the time.

But sometimes, I just need a break. And the gorgeous Knightsblood campus an hour away is the perfect escape.

So that's the main reason I'm here. Today in particular, though, there's a second reason.

"Evelina!"

I turn at the sound of Andrés' voice and grin when I see him waving at me as he steps out of the main admin building. His tailored gray suit complements his tanned, mediterranean features perfectly and fits his athletic frame like a glove as he jogs over to me across the quad.

"Just the beautiful lady I was looking for!"

I feel a flush creep up my neck and cheeks as his gorgeous dark eyes sparkle, and that lyrical Spanish accent washes over me.

"Andrés! Hi!"

A heated shiver whisks up my spine as he smiles and takes my hand, then brings the back of it to his lips.

Oh my. Remember the part where I said I could feel desire?

Aside from being model-level attractive and dizzyingly charming, Andrés Torvallés is also the crown prince of the Torvallés family, an *old*-school mafia family based in Barcelona that goes back literally centuries. He's probably in his early thirties, maybe late twenties—older than me enough that it feels mysterious and maybe a little sexy without being creepy.

He also sits on the board of directors here at Knightsblood, which is how we started chatting a couple of weeks ago.

Okay, full disclosure, I *might* have purposefully sought him out, and not because he looks like a Gucci model.

It's been three weeks since my disastrous attempt to sneak into the private party at Club Venom and pitch my request for help to Vaughn.

Three weeks since he told me to run away and never look back.

And I haven't, for the most part. In my day-to-day life, I haven't remotely *considered* trying to get close to him again.

My dreams, however, are a different story.

"I have to say, your text last night piqued my interest." Andrés flashes a dazzling white smile at me and winks again.

Okay, I'll admit, it sends butterflies fluttering through my stomach.

My dating history is a virtual blank slate. It's just…never taken priority. I suppose part of it is the way I was raised: Pavel Nikitin's perfect, poised, princess of daughter, kept in a glass cage up on a golden pedestal. Throw in a hugely overprotective tattooed giant of a big brother, not to mention all the hours ballet demands of you, and dating or sex just never had a prominent place in my life.

It's not that I've *never* dated or had zero experience. I mean, I'm twenty-three. It's just that my experience has been…*limited*.

Severely.

I've had all of one past relationship: Ethan, and we went on a handful of dates four years ago.

Nothing really happened. I mean, he was nice and sweet enough, and he understood that I wanted to go slow. But after a few weeks of me *not* sleeping with him, it just seemed to fizzle out.

Shocker.

“So.” Andrés winks at me again. “What is it you wanted to talk to me about?”

You know the saying: *If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again*.

I need to try, try again.

Just because Vaughn shot me down in terrifying fashion, it doesn’t mean anything has changed for my dad in Moscow. He can’t always talk on the phone, because he’s sure both the government and a bunch of high-powered bratva families are tapping his communications, but I can tell the situation’s not good.

Roman, obviously, isn’t going to do anything about that. And now Vaughn has also made his thoughts on the subject abundantly clear.

But again, Andrés isn’t just a pretty face. He’s the heir apparent to one of the most powerful underworld families on the planet. So tonight, I’m meeting with him to plead my case.

Before I can respond, Andrés grins as he glances down, his eyes sweeping over me. “You look positively gorgeous tonight, I might add.”

Heat floods my face.

I’m not blind. I see the way men look at me. I mean, not like they look at Milena with her runway model legs, or Brooklyn with her artsy, cool-girl vibe. But guys *do* look at me.

Including Andrés.

So, yes, although I’m meeting him tonight after my class to ask his family to take my father under protection, it doesn’t mean I haven’t…*dressed for the male gaze,* at least a little.

Instead of my usual post-dance hoodie and yoga pants, I'm in a cute pink skirt, pink flats, and a lighter white-pink mohair sweater.

What? I like pink.

A lot.

My hair is pulled up in a high ponytail, my makeup on point. I even used the extra smoky eyeshadow that Milena got me.

It's not like I'm trying to *seduce* Andrés—if I even knew how. But since this is a business meeting of sorts, the goal was to look my best.

Andrés seems to have noticed.

"Thank you," I stammer awkwardly, blushing like a goofball as I smile at him.

"Of course." He smiles back before his brow furrows. "Would you like to talk here, or…?"

I swallow. "Maybe somewhere more private," I venture. "It's…sensitive."

He nods, his brow still pinched with concern. "Of course. Come. I'm parked over here. I'll drive us somewhere we can talk without prying ears."

Relief floods through me. "Thank you, Andrés."

"Not at all."

He walks me over to a nearby parking lot and opens the passenger door to a stunning mint-green vintage Porsche 911 with a luxurious, saddle-brown leather interior.

"Oh my God, I *love* your car!" I gush.

Andrés chuckles as he slides into the driver's seat. "*Gracias*. It was my birthday present to myself last year. Fully rebuilt, 1973." He glances at me as the engine roars to life. "Are you into cars?"

I shake my head awkwardly. "Not really. I just like pretty things," I laugh.

“As do I.” Andrés winks at me again, and my pulse skips as he pulls out of the parking lot.

It’s dark as we drive through the beautiful campus, headlights washing over the Tudor-style student housing, Gothic academic buildings, and the towering spire of the cathedral that was built on the grounds here in the late 1600s, before the school was even founded.

“So, tell me what’s on your mind, Evelina,” Andrés purrs in his beautiful voice as the guards wave us through the front gates.

I exhale slowly, biting my lower lip and rubbing my thumb against my index and middle finger. “It’s my dad, actually.”

He nods. “*Sí*, I’m aware of your father’s…situation.” He arches a brow as he glances at me. “And his difficulties with, among others, your brother. Families can be complicated, no?”

I puff out a mirthless laugh. “Tell me about it.”

Andrés pulls off the main road, and we start to drive up to the peak of Griswold Hill, which sits above the Knightsblood campus and the nearby town of Hawthorne Hollow.

“I think I’m beginning to realize what you wanted to talk to me about,” Andrés says as we drive up the winding, wooded road to the top of the hill.

“I understand that it’s no small thing for a family such as yours to involve itself in something like this,” I say hesitantly. “But it’s getting bad. My father has a lot of enemies out there, and I understand that he isn’t a good man, I really do. But—”

“He’s still your father.” Andrés pulls to a stop in the little parking lot next to the clearing at the top of Griswold Hill and switches off the engine. “Believe me, I understand.” He sighs, a small smile on his face as he turns to me in the darkness.

Below us, Knightsblood sits perched like a dark jewel on the cliff above Connecticut Sound. The coastal town of Hawthorne Hollow twinkles with lights down closer to the shore.

“You’re right, it would be no small thing for my family to become entangled in this business.”

I nod quietly. “I know. And I’m very thankful that we’re even having this conversation.”

He turns to me and flashes another winning smile. “Of course.”

“Now, if your family were to take my father under their protection—”

Andrés laughs quietly. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves, Evelina.”

Shoot.

“Sorry,” I blurt. “It's just…my father doesn’t really have the luxury of time—”

“To start with…” Andrés unbuckles his seat belt and clears his throat. “Why don’t you show me.”

My brows knit. “Show you…what?”

“How thankful you are that we are having this conversation.”

Suddenly, the car feels smaller. The air feels thicker and more cloying. My seat belt feels constricting. And that charming smile no longer looks so charming.

It looks…predatory.

“Andrés—”

“I’m a man of business, Evelina.”

An icy coldness stabs into me when his hand suddenly lands on my thigh, right at the hem of my skirt.

“Wait. Andrés—”

“And in our world, yours and mine, there are many things that are….” He chuckles quietly. “*Transactional*.”

“I think I’d like to go back to—”

“And *I’d* like you to stop being such a little cocktease and spread your legs.”

A choked sound claws its way into my throat as he shoves his hand under my skirt, pushing it up my inner thigh.

“Andrés!” I blurt, grabbing his wrist and trying to shove his hand away. But he’s much stronger, and his cold fingers dig into my thigh, unyielding.

“This is how it will work, Evelina,” he murmurs. “My family will shield your father. But only if you stop being so coy with me.”

When I see him start to open his belt with his other hand, my soul leaves my body.

“No, Andrés, wait, please—”

“Are you going to be a good girl for me, Evelina?”

His hand slides further up my trembling thigh as horror floods my system.

“Andrés, stop. STOP! STOP IT! STOP—!”

It all happens incredibly quickly. One second, I’m frozen in my seat feeling like I’m literally going to throw up as Andrés’ hand creeps toward my underwear. The next moment, the driver side door is suddenly yanked open, and Andrés is forcibly ripped from the car.

All I can see is the dark shape of a man, snarling and growling as he knocks Andrés to the ground next to the Porsche. Andrés is swearing in Spanish, and my eyes go wide when I see him wrestle a knife from inside his jacket.

The second man roars as Andrés’ blade slashes his upper arm. But then the knife is knocked aside, and the two men fight with their bare hands, roaring and twisting on the ground.

With a scream, I’m fumbling and yanking at my seat belt, throwing the passenger door open and bolting from the car. I hear a roar of pain from behind me, and more swearing and thrashing. But I don’t look back as I run in a blind panic into the woods surrounding the little clearing.

My heart pounds like a drum against my ribs. Blood roars in my ears, mingling with the ragged sound of my breathing as I crash through the underbrush. Branches and leaves tangle in my hair, like clawed hands trying to slow me down.

Then suddenly, someone actually *does* grab me.

I scream a strangled cry of pure fear as the hand gets my ponytail in a fist and yanks, *hard*. My scalp explodes in pain as I'm tugged clean off my feet and land on my back in the dry leaves.

Pure survival instinct bursts inside me. I kick and scream and claw, fighting like a mad thing with the dark shape looming over me. I manage to catch him someplace soft with my heel, and he grunts and doubles over, giving me just enough time to scramble to my feet and turn to bolt.

Not happening.

A strong hand, wet, wraps like iron around my neck from behind. My scream withers and dies in my throat as the man wrenches me around and slams me up against the rough hardness of a tree. His fingers tighten as his chiseled face suddenly looms down into mine.

My heart stops beating and the world goes quite still. The moonlight glints through the jagged branches, illuminating the horror-show sight of the man…the man *I know*…his bleeding arm, his bloody hand wrapped around my throat, his icy blue eyes piercing into my very soul as his body presses hard to mine.

"My my… What have you gotten yourself into *this* time, Evelina," Vaughn growls.

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5

EVELINA

FOR A MOMENT, it's like none of this is real.

Because none of this is *me*.

I might have grown up in a bratva family, but I did so behind walls. Protected. Shielded. *Unsullied*.

I don’t find myself in situations like what just almost happened with Andrés.

I don’t see men fighting like animals.

I don’t run through the woods at night like the heroine in a horror movie.

And I *certainly* don’t find myself pinned to trees with bloodied hands around my throat, icy, dangerous, devil eyes ripping into my soul, while something that feels worryingly like *excitement* thrums in my veins.

This is the second time I’ve found myself face to face with Vaughn, with his hands around my throat and his darkness seeping into me like ink staining my skin. The most alarming thing isn’t that it’s happening again.

…It’s that the feeling slithering and coiling inside me isn’t purely fear or horror.

We stand like that for another few long seconds, only the nighttime sounds of the forest and my heavy breathing disrupting the silence. Vaughn’s slippery, bloodied fingers—his own blood, I think, based on the slash

wound on his upper arm soaking his dress shirt—tighten on my neck, squeezing just enough to send a bolt of vicious and all-consuming heat flashing through my core.

“Do you know, Evelina,” he growls, “why captive birds can’t be set free?”

I blink, swallowing against his hand and still trying to wrap my head around the idea that any of this is real.

“I—*what*?” I whisper.

“Because when pretty little birds are raised in pretty little cages, they never learn the basic survival skills that would keep them alive in the wild.”

Oh.

He’s talking about me.

“I…” My brows knit. “I’m not a caged bird—”

“No, and that’s the problem,” he growls. “Someone’s had the bad sense to let you *out* of your cage, which is how you keep finding yourself in places and situations where you do not belong,” he murmurs darkly.

A heated shiver ripples down my spine, shaking me to my core.

“You… You’re hurt,” I whisper.

Vaughn’s eyes don’t move a fraction of an inch, just keep stabbing into mine.

“What *the fuck* were you doing out here with Andrés Torvallés?” he growls.

I don’t say anything.

“I asked you a question, Evelina.” I shiver as his thumb strokes my jugular, the slick motion sending a bolt of strange electricity through my system. “It would be in your best interests to *answer it*.”

“Just…” My throat bobs. “Just a date.”

The tension in his jaw ratchets up a dozen levels, and his eyes flash with blue fire.

“*A date*,” he says coldly, his voice like razors.

“A date that went wrong,” I add. “Seriously, thank you for—”

“I wasn’t saving you, I was *killing him*,” he rasps darkly.

A sharp tremor tears through me as my eyes widen. “He… He’s *dead*?”

“My condolences,” Vaughn says dryly.

Holy hell.

“Now, again,” Vaughn murmurs in that emotionless, even tone, “I would like you to tell me what you were *really* doing out here with that motherfucker. And if you lie to me again, I’ll fuck you until you cry.”

There’s a glitch in my reality, or maybe in me. My reaction when he says that should not be the one I just had.

I shouldn’t ripple with heat I don’t understand.

I shouldn’t be instantly squeezing my thighs tightly together.

I shouldn’t feel warmth liquifying my insides.

The seconds tick by at a glacial pace as I stand there pinned to a tree in the woods by a monster with a blood-soaked hand around my throat, dangerous, viciously alluring thoughts bleeding through my veins like delicious poison.

“I…” My throat is so dry I can barely speak. I swallow heavily against his hand and try again. “I was going to ask him about…about my father.”

A bleak, mirthless smile spreads over his lips.

“You genuinely thought the Torvallés family would give a single flying fuck about your father.”

I flinch. “I…” My eyes close as I drag in a rough breath, then I open them again to glare at him. “I don’t exactly have a lot of options,” I hiss.

“Then perhaps it’s time to let nature take its course.”

My heart twists. “He’s my *father*—”

“That means very little to me,” he spits back.

“So why do you care if I was asking Andrés for help, then!?” I blurt. “It bothered you so much that you *killed him*!”

Vaughn barks out a cold, quiet laugh. “I killed him because we had our own issues that needed addressing. Believe me, it had fuck-all to do with you.” His lips twist. “If you’re under the impression that I’m your knight in shining armor, you should immediately purge that idea from your system.” Vaughn’s captivating eyes narrow. “I don’t give a shit about you asking that walking cum-stain for help, or fucking him, or whatever you got all dolled up tonight to do with him.”

My mouth falls open. “*Excuse me*?” I squeak.

“But what I do give a shit about, Evelina,” Vaughn continues, “is you seeking assistance from the Torvallés family.”

My mouth purses. “Like I said, I don’t exactly have a lot of options.” I frown. “Why do you care that I went to the Torvallés family?”

“I have a complicated relationship with them,” he growls. “And unfortunately, you and I are too few degrees of separation.”

My brow knits. “What?”

“*Your* bother is sleeping with *my* brother,” he says tightly. “Ergo, we are too closely connected for you to be trying to get in bed with the Torvallés family.”

My face heats. “I wasn’t…*getting in bed* with anyone.”

He says nothing. But his thumb strokes slickly through the blood over my pulse point again, sending another ripple flickering through me.

“*Please—*”

“Don’t.”

The word barks coldly from his throat, startling me.

“Don’t what?”

“Beg,” he murmurs, his cold eyes holding mine captive. “It makes me hard.”

Jesus..

Again, the response that flickers to life inside me like a dirty little secret is *not* the one I should have.

Heat shouldn't simmer and liquify my core, and I shouldn't get a tightening sensation in my belly that zips down to my thighs.

“So, you won’t help me yourself,” I choke, “and you also get a say in who *else* can’t?”

Vaughn's jaw clenches. “Even if wanted to help you with the situation with your father—and to be clear, I *don’t*—I couldn’t.”

“But…but the Syndicate—”

“You don’t know anything about the Syndicate.”

“I know it’s powerful,” I counter. “And I know you run it. So—”

“It isn’t that the Syndicate can’t,” he grunts. “It’s that it *wouldn’t*.”

I glare at him. “You mean *you* wouldn’t.”

I gasp sharply as his hand tightens around my throat. “I mean *the Syndicate* wouldn't,” he growls. “The Syndicate is not a charity, Evelina. It’s a brotherhood. A family that helps its own…not outsiders.”

He draws in a slow breath, and I don’t realize my legs are shaking until my knees knock together as his thumb traces through the sticky blood on my throat.

Vaughn straightens to his full height, his broad shoulders half-blotting out the moon as he looms over me looking partly annoyed and partly amused.

“Go home, Evelina,” he murmurs quietly.

His hand finally drops from my throat, and I immediately notice the cool air hitting my skin where his hand just was.

“Hold on,” I blurt as he starts to turn away. “*Please*—”

I shudder violently as he whirls on me. His blood-soaked hand grabs my jaw, making me gasp as he angles my face up to his. His slick thumb traces a thin line just under my bottom lip, across my chin.

“What did I just say about *begging*, Evelina,” he says quietly but with breathtaking intensity, still in that unnervingly emotionless tone.

He drops his hand, leaving me shaking and trembling against the tree, my pulse racing.

“Go home, princess,” Vaughn murmurs. “Same deal as the party. Forget everything you saw tonight.”

He starts to walk away.

“Wait.”

I’m a fraction of a second away from adding “please” before I stop myself.

Don’t beg, it makes me hard.

I steel myself as he slowly turns to look at me again.

“You said the Syndicate only helps its own. How does someone join?”

Utter silence descends over the clearing. Even the background noise of the nighttime animals goes quiet, as if nature itself is holding its breath at the sheer idiocy of what just fell out of my mouth.

But family is family.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I’m serious. How do I—”

“I heard you the first time.”

There’s a deadness to his voice as it floats through the still air between us like a frozen breath. Vaughn’s brows pinch a little, as if he’s trying to decide if I’m making a terrible joke.

He regards me coolly. “I don’t think you realize what you’re asking, *princess*.”

The “princess” rolls bitingly off his tongue like a slur, and I stiffen.

“I want to join,” I spit, with a bit more force this time. “How does one do that?”

I tremble as he slowly walks back over to me. He gets so close in my personal space that I find myself stumbling back, until my shoulders hit the rough bark of the tree behind me. Vaughn doesn’t stop until his hard body is almost pinned to mine, caging me against the tree as he looms over me.

“The Syndicate would *break you*,” he rasps quietly.

I shake my head, shivering. “*It wouldn’t,*” I croak.

His eyes pinch. “*I* would break you.”

A wicked throb tightens and coils low in my belly. Utter silence envelops the clearing again as the world goes still. All I can hear is the sound of my heavy breathing and the soft crunch of dead leaves beneath my feet as I shift uncomfortably under his unblinking, vicious glare.

Time ticks by in silence. I can’t tell if he’s been staring at me for nine seconds or ninety minutes.

“I’m going to tell you something,” he finally says quietly. “And you will imprint it on your fucking soul.”

I start to open my mouth to agree. But before a single sound can escape my lips, Vaughn leans right down into me, making me gasp and sending a ripple through my core when his lips brush my ear.

“*Remember that you asked for this*.”

Then, without another word, he straightens up, turns, and starts to walk away into the night.

I blink, frozen, my back still tight against the tree as if his body is still pinning me to it.

“Vaughn—”

“Expect an invitation in the next few days,” he growls, still walking away.

Wait, what?

“Although if you’re smart, Evelina,” he murmurs, glancing back, “you’ll ignore it when it comes.”

He starts to recede into the shadows of the trees as I stare at him, wide-eyed.

“Thank you,” I croak.

He halts mid-step, his back still toward me. “Don’t.”

I shiver as he turns to glance at me over his shoulder, the moonlight casting ghostly shadows and deep, violent lines across his face.

“Don’t thank me.”

“Why not?”

“Because if you knew the first thing about me, you’d know there’s nothing about being on my radar to be thankful for.”

* * *

THE INVITATION ARRIVES three days later, delivered by a man dressed in black waiting for me after rehearsal one day. He says nothing, just hands me a black envelope sealed with venom-green wax bearing the imprint of a dagger encircled by a halo of light. Inside, the invitation itself is handwritten on parchment paper in ink the same green as the seal.

You have been selected to present yourself for initiation.

The process will be difficult. Not all who attempt it will succeed. Risk of serious injury or death is inherent.

If you wish to proceed, you will arrive at Blackbriar Hall at nine p.m. two weeks to the day from receipt of this notice. Dress in black clothes you can move in.

Attendance constitutes consent. Absence will be taken as refusal.

Per Silentium, Per Sanguinem.

I reread the invitation four times, feeling my pulse quicken with every word.

Suddenly, I realize I have no *idea* what I've signed up for.

But there's no going back now.

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6

EVELINA

AFTER A FEW DAYS passing in a hazy blur, I realize I will physically have to remove the invitation from my immediate vicinity or else I'll keep reading it over and over, freaking myself out and possibly losing my nerve to go. So I tuck it out of sight into a book on dance theory that I sometimes bring with me to Knightsblood for my class there.

Wondering if I'm legitimately insane.

A piece of me knows that I must be, at least in part. It's the only explanation for why I am still be considering showing up at Blackbriar Hall, which Google tells me is an old Carnegie family mansion up on a peak in the Adirondacks north of New York. I casually asked Val about it the other day after seeing a few pictures, and he just rolled his eyes and said it was his brother's "evil Bond villain lair".

It didn't do *a thing* to calm my nerves. I mean, the place already looks like a haunted mansion.

But receiving the invitation is really just a natural extension of all the insanity that came *before* it.

Like sneaking into Club Venom, which led to my first chilling encounter with Vaughn.

That's not something I do, at all. "Evelina Nikitin" and "sex clubs" go together about as well as brushing your teeth after drinking orange juice.

But even if it had been a pet store or a wellness center, I don’t *sneak* into places.

I don’t wear disguises, or use fake names, or try to seduce drunk men to get into somewhere I shouldn’t go.

That’s just not who I am.

…Right?

Or maybe I’ve gone twenty-three years only *thinking* I knew who I was. That's becoming a theory with stronger legs than I'd like it to have the more I think about it.

The night in the woods up on Griswold Hill is another jarring example. Forget the things that happened that were out of my control. It’s the fact that I was there at all that worries me.

I know I’m naive about the world, and probably a little too innocent. My friends like to lovingly tease me about it, but… They’re not wrong.

That said, naive doesn’t mean “stupid”. I don't make a habit of getting into cars with men I don’t know very well, and letting them drive me into secluded woods. God only knows what might have happened to me if Vaughn hadn’t…

A shiver ripples through my body.

It’s not the first time I’ve witnessed a murder.

That was when I was twelve.

It was just Dad and me then: Roman was already off at Knightsblood. I woke up in the middle of the night and heard shouting downstairs. I ended up following the sound down to the basement, where I saw my father standing by while one of his men pointed a gun at a man, bound and gagged on his knees.

I looked away, but couldn’t block out the sound of the shot or the splatter of wetness against concrete.

Then, when I was sixteen, my father took me with him to a business thing in Chicago. We were leaving a restaurant via the back door when the hitman one of Dad's enemies had hired jumped out and attacked us. My father singlehandedly managed to rip the gun out of the guy's hand, knock him to the ground, and put a bullet between his eyes.

It's things like that make me conflicted about his current predicament.

Yes, I *know* he tried to kill Roman and Val. But then I think of that time at the restaurant when he literally saved my life.

And that is exactly how I find myself the bearer of an invitation to join one of the most secretive, powerful, and dangerous underworld organizations on Earth.

Family is still family.

* * *

"OH MY *GOD*, they're *so fucking CUTE!*"

Milena squeals as Selene wraps her tiny arms around the stuffed monkey that I just gave her. I know she's only five months old and can't sleep with it until she's at least a year. Still, I wanted her to have it, and I wanted her to get it so early because, selfishly, I want that stuffy to be her first one, and I want Auntie Evie to be the one to give it to her.

Next to Selene, her cousin Bella burbles and rolls over onto her stomach on the play mat, looking equally adorable.

Across the room, slumped on the couch looking exhausted as only a new parent can, Kratos chuckles and rakes a tattooed hand through his messy hair.

"Poor kid seems to have gotten all her genes from me, though," he sighs, nodding at his daughter, Selene, and then turning to wink at Bianca. "Guess we'll just have to have a couple more so the world gets more of your good looks."

Bianca used to dance with us at the Zakharova before she took a leave of absence after getting pregnant with little Selene. I've known her since long before that, though: her bothers Carmine and Nico were buddies of Roman's at Knightsblood. Carmine now runs the Barone Mafia family and is married to our friend and fellow dancer, Lyra. And Nico is married to *another* of our "ballet bitches" crew, Naomi. It's all rather…incestuous.

Bianca snorts a sharp, sleep-deprived laugh as she eyes her giant of a husband. "You want to have another one?"

"*Just one*?"

She rolls her eyes and jabs him in his firm chest with her finger. "Listen, buddy, if *you* want to be the one waking up three times a night trying to get a kid to fucking latch onto a chapped nipple, be my fucking guest."

Milena and I crack up from the floor where we're both ooh-ing and ahh-ing over the babies. Kratos lets out another rumbly laugh as he wraps an arm around his wife and pulls her close.

"Babygirl, I'd get boobies surgically attached if it would make your life easier."

Milena makes a puppy-dog face. "*Aww*, that's so fucking cute."

Bianca shoots her a look. "It's really not." She grins as she twists her face to look up at Kratos. "Please don't. I like your chest just the way it is, *sans* boobies."

He grins. "And I just so happen to like your chest the way it is, too. *With* boobies."

"Ugh. You mean the ones that are sore, gnawed on, and not nearly as perky as they used to be before our darling daughter came along?" Bianca pouts.

Kratos just smiles, touching her chin with two fingers and lifting her gaze back to his. "I wouldn't change a fucking thing, babygirl," he murmurs. "Believe me, you've never been hotter."

She blushes. "You're just saying that."

“Come into the other room and I’ll show you how much more than ’just saying it’ I am.”

“Hi, we’re *right here*?” I groan.

Bianca giggles and buries her face in her hands as Kratos roars with laughter.

“Seriously!” Milena adds. “There are children present!” She turns and sticks out her tongue at me. “Plus Evie! I mean, delicate ears? *Hello*?”

“*Ha ha ha*,” I retort, giving her a dramatic scrunched-up face.

“So how’re all my ballet bitches doing?” Bianca sighs. “I feel like I’ve been in an underground bunker cut off from the world for the last few months.”

I shrug. “I mean, nothing much new to report. Everyone’s waiting on Kir to pop the question to Brooklyn any day now.”

Bianca grins. “And how’s Bane and Dove’s world tour going? God, that’s *so* freaking cool that they could just take six months off of life like that.”

Milana sighs. “Dude, *for real*. I don’t think I would have the balls to ask Kuzmina for half a fucking *year* off from the company with a guarantee of coming back.”

Bianca laughs. “I mean it helps that she’s *incredible*.

“True,” Milena nods. “Oh, and don’t forget, she’s not going by Dove anymore.”

“Right, right,” Bianca nods. Then she giggles. “I feel like I need a cheat sheet to keep up with all the changes and drama you all get up to at the Zakharova without me.”

We all laugh. Then I turn back to the two adorable babies rolling around on the play mat. “I feel bad,” I sigh, looking at Selene and then at Bella, Kratos’ brother Hades’ infant daughter that Kratos and Bianca are watching today while Hades and Elsa are out of town. “I should have brought another stuffy for Selene's cousin.”

Kratos laughs. “Trust me, that kid is *good* in the stuffy department. Hades spoils the shit out of her.”

Milena coos at baby Bella as she leans over and tickles her toes. “She looks *just like* Hades.” She grins and glances between Selene and Kratos. “Do the kids in your family ever get *any* DNA from the parent who isn’t a Drakos?”

Bianca rolls her eyes, jabbing a thumb at Kratos. “Dude, you should see his brother Ares’ and his wife Neve’s kid. You'd swear they freaking *cloned* Ares.”

Kratos beams. “Yeah, Achilles is going to be a little heartbreaker when he gets older. And if the Drakos genes extend past looks, that one…” He points at Bella. “She's going to be fucking *trouble*, just like her dad.”

Bianca laughs. “That’s where it stops. Deimos and Dahlia’s little girl Noor is pure Dahlia—oh my God, that *hair*. Freaking *gorgeous*. And Calliope’s boys Lachlan and Ronan are total miniatures of her husband, Castle.”

I don’t know Kratos’ family that well. I’ve only met some of them a few times. But it always amuses me that he and his siblings—and now at least one of the next generation too—were named after ancient Greek gods, titans, and muses.

Bianca glances at Milena. “Hey, do you and Nero know what you’re having yet? I have perma-baby brain and can’t remember if you’ve found out.”

Milena’s husband is Nero De Luca, head of the De Luca Mafia, certified psychopath and a good friend of my brother’s.

Milena glances down at her still completely flat stomach and lays a hand over it with a shy smile. “We don’t know. We've decided we want it to be a surprise.”

Bianca hoots a laugh. “Since when do you like being in the same *area code* as surprises?”

Our blonde friend grins. “Nero’s…altered my opinion on them,” she says with a flush to her cheeks.

I smile. “Aww, that’s sweet.”

Bianca cracks up, and Kratos flashes a shit-eating grin.

My brow furrows. “Wait, why is that funny?”

Bianca cackles. “She means Nero’s changed her opinion on surprises with the little games they play involving him jumping out and chasing her down before fucking her.”

“*Girl*!” Milena shrieks, turning beet red as Bianca howls with laughter.

Meanwhile, my face becomes the surface of the sun.

“*Oh*,” I mumble awkwardly. “I…get it now.”

“Sorry, Evie,” Milena giggles, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as she, Bianca, and Kratos laugh. “Your poor innocent ears.”

Innocent.

Naive.

Ignorant of all things sex.

I know they’re just teasing, and it really doesn’t bother me.

But they’re not *entirely* right.

Maybe I don’t know as much about it as they do, given that they’re both married and, you know, obviously have sex lives. But I know more than they think.

I know what I’ve found online late at night.

I know the spicy Booktok recommendations I’ve read.

And I remember the one time I almost took the biggest leap of all.

It was months ago. I was feeling adventurous, and I don’t know…

Horny, maybe?

Whatever the reason, I found myself reading online about an app that Club Venom—the same Club Venom where I crashed Vaughn’s party—had

released: a Tinder-esque experience that could match like-minded kinky people for “meets” outside the club.

You didn’t have to be a Club Venom member to use the app, but there was still a vetting process. They promised absolute discretion, and I understand why: I mean, they cater to some of the most powerful underworld people in New York.

So I signed up.

I made a profile.

…and then I got a match.

That’s as far as it went. I was never going to meet the guy I matched with—I think the whole thing was more an experiment for me than anything. Regardless, the day he asked me to meet, our conversation in the app was randomly deleted, my profile got blocked, and then my account was put under review.

A small part of me suspects Roman might have had something to do with that. But he’s never brought it up.

Thank *God*. Because I’d literally die of mortification if my bother talked to me about my online conversations with a stranger involving dark, depraved…well, I don’t even know if they're fantasies. More things I’d read about in books or online that felt…thrilling.

“Sweet, innocent Evie,” Bianca grins.

I groan. “C’mon, I just haven’t had enough coffee yet. My mind’s slow.”

Melina gives me a “yeah, right” look. We both know I didn’t get the joke because I’m a complete dork when it comes to sex at all, let alone sex that involves being *chased down*.

I shiver.

I mean, *what*?

“Well, little miss primal play,” Bianca giggles, eyeing Milena, “get your freak on now, before you’re too tired even to bathe yourself after the baby

comes.”

I laugh along with the rest of them. Inside, a different question is creeping through my thoughts.

What on Earth is primal play?

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7

EVELINA

Primal play refers to the exploration of raw, instinctive, animalistic behaviors in sexual situations, often involving hunter/prey dynamics, chasing, growling, and psychological intensity.

Oh my.

Sitting on a bench on the Knightsblood campus, my eyes widen as I reread the definition on my phone. I've spent the last couple of days trying to put the question out of my mind. But it's still been there in the background.

Lingering.

Lurking.

With a shiver, I glance up, nervously eyeing the older gentleman sitting on a bench across the small square from me, on the other side of an ivy-covered statue of one of the founders of the college.

He's just a professor here, dummy. Not a mind-reader interested in your dirty internet searches.

Exhaling, I glance back at my phone. A tingle chases up my spine and my thighs press together when I read the definition of primal play again. Instantly, I'm back in the woods up on Griswold Hill.

Heart racing.

Pulse thudding.

Body tightening and electrified with a sense of fight or flight, a hand wrapped around my throat, pinned roughly to a tree.

“Evelina?”

I almost drop my phone. My eyes snap up, and my brows knit as I find myself looking at the familiar but unplaceable brunette standing in front of me with a puzzled look on her face that mirrors my own.

“Evelina Nikitin…right?”

Then it hits me.

“Gabriella!”

Gabriella—Gabby—is Nero De Luca’s younger sister, Milena’s sister-in-law. She’s about same height as me, but with a lot more curves and *gorgeous* dark hair that falls in waves past her shoulders.

I jump awkwardly to my feet, both of us smiling as we hug.

“Hi! Sorry, I’m scatterbrained today.”

“Tell me about it,” she laughs, hefting the enormous tote bag full of books on her shoulder.

My eyes drop to it, brows furrowing. “Are you a student here?”

She nods. “Yeah. I got in when I was younger, then decided I’d much rather party, drink, and be a general thorn in my brother’s side.” She grins, shrugging. “But over the last year, my priorities changed a little. I was seeing someone, but then…” She frowns and looks down. “Well, long story short, it didn’t work out. So I thought now would be a good time to finally see why Knightsblood is such a big deal. Nero pulled some strings, and here I am. I'm enjoying it, but I *do not* recommend being a college freshman at twenty-four. I feel like everyone’s fucking *mom*.” She grins. “So… What are you doing here?”

I laugh. “Teaching, actually. Dance,” I add when I see her brows arch. “To some of the advanced ballet students in the fine arts program.” I shrug. “I dunno. It’s a nice break from things in the city. I like it.”

“That sounds awesome,” she smiles.

I frown suddenly. “Hey, do you want to sit?”

She glances at her phone and shrugs. “Why not. I’ve got a few minutes before my Econ class.”

I turn to grab my dance bag and my own oversized canvas tote, full of dance theory books. “Sorry, let me get my stuff out of the—*shoot*.”

The tote slips out of my grip, spilling its contents onto the walkway. My chest instantly tightens.

…As my invitation to the Obsidian Syndicate initiation slides out of my copy of Ann Cooper’s *Engaging Bodies: The Politics and Poetics of Corporeality*.

For a half-second, I’m frozen. Then the moment passes, and I quickly drop to my knees and shove the black envelope with the green seal back between the pages of the book.

Why are you freaking out?

I stop frantically shoving my books back into my bag and take a breath.

It’s just an envelope. It’s not like a *sex toy* just fell out of my bag.

Exhaling my anxiety, I finish shoving the books back into my tote and stand.

“Wow, I’m clumsy today—”

I stiffen. Gabriella is looking at me with a half-shocked, half-intrigued expression. My cheeks burn as I squirm under her gaze.

“Um… What is it?” I croak.

Gabriella’s full bottom lip sucks between her teeth. Her eyes snap to mine, then back to my tote, then up to my face again. Then, she quietly reaches

into her bag, fishes around for a moment, and pulls her hand back out.

She's holding a black envelope with a green seal on it, just like mine.

The color drains from my face as our eyes lock.

"I…" She smiles wryly. "I don't think we're supposed to talk about it," she murmurs. Then her lips pull into a grin. "But *holy shit!*" she whisper-squeals.

She grabs my hands, yanking me down beside her on the bench and leaning close.

"You're going to the initiation too?" she whispers conspiratorially.

I smile weakly, nodding. "Yeah, I…look, I haven't told anyone—"

"Well, duh," she laughs. "I think that's one of the big rules: don't tell anyone. I don't want to, anyway. Nero would fucking *kill me*."

I smile again. "Can… Can I be honest?"

She nods. "Of course."

"I think I'm a little out of my depth with all of this. I'm not even sure I'll go."

She nods. "I get it. It's a little intimidating." She rolls her eyes. "Okay, it's a lot intimidating. I mean *risk of serious injury or death*? Like…what?!" She shivers, then shakes her head. "But, I mean, it's the Obsidian fucking Syndicate. Becoming an acolyte would be *huge*."

My brows knit. "Um…*why*? I mean, why do you want to join?"

She gives me a strange look. "Probably for the same reasons you do? I'm a second-born in a mafia family—and a girl, at that. Nero knows I'd stab him through the fucking *eye* if he tried to force me to marry some mafia prince. But that's our lot in life. I mean, I can't imagine your brother would make you marry anyone, but…" She shrugs. "Anyway, I want more than that. I want *power*. I want to lead. And that's not going to happen in the De Luca family as Nero's kid sister." She glances back at me. "I like that the Syndicate doesn't care what order you were born, or if you've got a dick, or

a pussy, or fucking *tentacles*," she laughs. Then she shrugs again. "What about you?"

Uhh…

"Same," I blurt quickly. "Pretty much."

"That's my *girl*," she beams. "Seriously, it's so cool that you're going to be at the initiation too! I mean, I think it's supposed to be anonymous…" She rolls her eyes. "I've heard there's masks and shit. But it'll still be comforting to have someone I know there. I've heard the initiation process can get *insane*. Plus, the new Marquis is supposed to be super intense. Like, a real psycho."

I frown. "Marquis?"

"The leader." She furrows her brow. "Of the Syndicate. That's his title."

Vaughn.

The "intense" Marquis is *Vaughn*.

Hoo boy.

Gabriella glances at her phone again and winces. "Shit, I actually need to get going." She looks up at me and smiles. "Can I get your contact info? We should, you know, hang. Especially if you're here on campus now and then."

She and I exchange numbers. Then I stand and hug her before she scoots off to class, promising to be in touch.

I sit on the bench again, my mind whirling: thinking about the initiation, the fact that I know someone else who's been pulled into the strange, shadowy world of the Syndicate…

"May I?"

I startle, looking up quickly. The older gentleman who was sitting on the other side of the square—the professor—is now standing over me, a smile on his face as he gestures to the bench I'm sitting on.

“Uh…of course,” I mumble, shuffling over to make room, trying not to frown. Like, there are three other benches around the statue, and they’re *all* empty.

The man is elegantly dressed in a tailored linen suit. He *smells* elegant, too…both of which feel strange for a college professor. He settles next to me on the bench, folding his hands in his lap and looking straight ahead.

“I think you *should*.”

I frown, glancing at him.

“Beg pardon?”

He’s still looking forward ahead, a benign smile on his lips and an impassive expression in his eyes.

“You should go to the initiation, *Ms. Nikitin*.”

Anxiety, cold and sharp, twists in my chest. The air leaves my lungs, and an uncomfortable tremor drips like ice water down my spine.

“I—I’m sorry,” I blurt. “Do we know—”

“No.”

The benign smile is gone now, and his voice has become lower and colder.

The accent is much more noticeable now, too.

Spanish.

He turns to level an icy look right into my eyes. “No, we don’t know each other, Evelina. But you know my son, Andrés.”

My face goes white as the ground drops out from under me.

“I—”

“My name is Diego Torvallés, Ms. Nikitin. And I *know* that you and my son know each other, because he spoke to me the other day, and mentioned that you and he were going on a date.”

I swallow heavily, trying not to shake.

“I—not a date,” I blurt. “We… We were just talking.”

His eyes narrow. “Ahh, so you *were* with him the other night.”

Darn it.

Part of me feels I should lie, because the vibe is all wrong here. Plus, he seems like the kind of man who could sniff out the truth from a mile away anyhow.

He also seems like the kind of man you in *no* way, shape or form lie to.

“I… I was,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “We walked together after the ballet class that I sometimes teach here. Then he…” I swallow. “He gave me a ride into town.”

Diego says nothing. He just sits there next to me, his dark eyes peering into my very soul. The seconds tick by as my heart thuds loudly in my chest.

“A ride into town,” he finally says, his voice edged, his eyes glinting as they lock with mine.

I nod firmly. “Yes.”

Another few long, agonizing seconds tick by.

“You see, Evelina,” he murmurs, “my son is *missing*, and has been since the night he *gave you a ride*.”

A razor slips dangerously down my spine, snapping it straight as dread pools in my belly.

“He… He is?” I gasp, hoping to hell I sound suitably surprised.

Diego nods. “Yes. But in my world, heirs as important as Andrés don’t go *missing*.”

Alarm bells start whining in my head.

“They… They *don’t*?” I croak.

I shiver at the vicious way his eyes remain trained on me. “Why don’t we stop playing games, Ms. Nikitin,” he growls, the low, gravelly timbre of his

voice raking over me like knives. “I know my son is dead, and judging from the overly rehearsed way your eyebrows shot up just now,” he snarls, “I can tell that you know, too.”

Whatever color was left in my face drains instantly. My hands are shaking as I grab my bags.

“I…I’m sorry, I need to go—”

I jolt as he grabs my wrist tightly, keeping me pinned to the bench.

“No, what you need to do is *listen very closely*,” he says icily. “I very much doubt you personally had anything to do with my son’s death. But I also *sincerely* doubt that you’re not connected somehow.”

He leans closer to me, making my throat seize up as my skin ripples with fear.

“You are *going* to go to that initiation, Ms. Nikitin. And then you are going to do whatever it takes to make it through.”

My brows pinch as my throat bobs heavily.

“I have a bastard son.” His eyes narrow. “An illegitimate child, born out of wedlock. I’ve never met him, and I very much doubt he knows I exist. But he’s out there. And while I’ve never cared to seek him out, I now find myself in a situation where it might become necessary.” His dark eyes pierce into me. “I have no other sons, Ms. Nikitin. I think we both know how problematic that can be in our world for the transfer of power. Now, I don’t know who he is, don’t know what he even looks like. But I *do* know that he’s in the upper echelon of the Obsidian Syndicate.”

My heart races. “M-Mr. Torvallés—”

“You’re going to that initiation, Evelina,” he says quietly. “Because you’re going to become a member of the Syndicate, and then you’re going to find my heir.”

The world starts to shrink around me, so tightly that the air feels squeezed from my lungs.

“And I *know* you’re going to do this for me, Evelina,” Diego Torvallés continues, “because if you don’t, I’ll kill your father, and your brother, and his little boyfriend, and *I’ll make you watch while I do it*.”

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8

DEMON

How do we feel about this?

Our mind twists and shape-shifts amorphously as we stand at the foot of the king-sized bed, watching Val sleep with Roman in his arms.

How *do* we feel about this…

We watched our brother from afar for years while he grew up in the foster system, and we were climbing the ranks of the Syndicate.

We have a strange relationship with the brotherhood that we've spent almost our entire life in. On the one hand, it's the reason we're alive. It gave us food and shelter when we were starving and cold, and gave us purpose when we were ready to give up on life.

But this brotherhood isn't and has never been all sunshine and roses. It was a brutal environment in which to grow up. Yes, Val's upbringing in the system, facing down the monsters and predators that scarred and almost broke him was hard—harder than any child should have to endure.

But growing up in the Syndicate meant pledging your soul to darkness. We didn't want that for him.

Instead, we watched from a distance as he stared down those monsters, growing stronger and finding himself through ballet.

Our uncertainty concerning his current and quite serious relationship with Roman Nikitin is not based on anything qualms surrounding sexual

orientation.

Fuck who you want. We don’t care. The concern about "how we feel about this" has nothing to do with the fact that he’s got a man in his arms.

It's *who* that man is.

Our jaw ticks as we stand in the darkness, watching.

The Nikitin Bratva doesn't have anywhere *near* the level of global power and influence that the Syndicate does. None of the great underworld families of New York does, honestly. But still. They sit at the Iron Table. Collectively, with their allies, there’s a potential for them to be… *bothersome*.

We could just kill him.

Our brow furrows.

No, we couldn’t.

Sure we could. It would be easy. And it’s been so long since we snuffed out a life.

Our jaw tightens.

Since YOU took a life, one of us corrects the other.

The other part of us laughs coldly.

It’s always adorable when you try to pretend there’s no us..

We glare down at the sleeping figures in the bed.

Just kill him and be done with it.

No. Val would never forgive us.

He would. He'd find someone else to love.

I don’t think that’s how it works.

We bite our tongue to stop from laughing out loud.

As if we know anything about love.

We have a good point.

Besides, we coax ourselves, *is it really Val that we're concerned might not forgive us for murdering Roman?*

Our eyes narrow in the darkness.

No, it's not.

So what the fuck are we still doing in this room, pussy? This isn't why we came here tonight.

No, you're right. It's not.

Then let's get to it.

Our footsteps are silent as we make our way out of the bedroom that Roman shares with our brother. Quietly, we cross the length of the massive Nikitin mansion, until we get to the wing that houses *her* room.

The actual reason we're here tonight.

She sleeps in a princess bed.

A pink, four-poster, curtain-draped princess bed.

Because of course she does.

She doesn't stir as we come to a stop right next to it and quietly pull back the gauzy pink curtains. Moonlight illuminates her gentle, innocent face—the delicate brow, the soft, full lips, the button nose and the rosy cheeks.

We should decorate it with our cum like a fucking Jackson Pollock.

We grit our teeth, groaning as our cock thickens, lurid images of pumping hot cum all over her sleeping face making our balls tighten.

Somehow, we restrain ourselves.

Pussy.

Shut up.

Make us, pussy.

We ignore that part of ourselves—or rather, momentarily *forget* about that part of ourselves—as we look down at her sleeping form.

She's beautiful. Gorgeous, really, in such an innocent, dainty, princess way.

A work of art.

So let the world know what a masterpiece she is by painting that pretty face like a motherfucking Pollock, you cunt.

Stop fucking talking, asshole.

We reach for the covers, gently pulling them off her body. She stirs slightly but keeps sleeping, blissfully unaware of us standing there or of the dark, hungry thoughts swirling through our broken mind.

Why the fuck did you have to capture our attention, little princess?

Our eyes slide over the silk pajamas she's wearing—pink, of course. Slowly, we lay our hand on her shoulder, gently rolling her off her side until she's on her back. Her faint scent of violet and vanilla teases our nostrils.

Her chest rises and falls as she blissfully slumbers. She *continues* to blissfully slumber as we slowly undo one button of her top after another, until it falls open.

She's got lovely tits. Small and pert, capped with pale pink nipples that tighten in the coolness of the air under our gaze. A soft whimper escapes her lips as we cup one in our hand, feeling the nipple pebble against our palm.

How receptive.

The bottoms are merely tied with a bow on the drawstring. That opens easily enough, and we swear, it's almost as if she's lifting her ass to help us as we peel them off her hips down to her knees.

Fairly plain, pink panties are all that cover her now.

Does she have a psychological aversion to other colors?

Fuck you.

Fuck US, motherfucker. Keep going.

Our dick is painfully hard, tenting the front of our slacks as we reach for the panties. At first, it's just a single finger that we drag up the seam between her thighs. A soft whimper escapes her sleeping lips, her brow caving just a touch.

Her fucking hips rise a little as we cup her pussy through the panties.

She's warm.

She's *wet*.

You'll be our fucking undoing, princess.

Our fingers slip into the waistband, oh-so-gently tugging the lace from her hips, peeling it away from her sex.

Fuck.

Her tits are lovely. But her pussy is *exquisite*.

It will look even more exquisite stretched around our cock, yes?

Agreed.

So what are we WAITING for?

Our belt jangles quietly in the stillness of the room, and we groan as we pull our swollen, leaking cock free.

Do it, pussy. Split her in half with our cock until she's dripping all over it like a good little slut.

It's amazing we aren't in jail with your lack of impulse control.

Less talking. More fucking.

Our hand hovers over her pussy for a moment, barely millimeters above her glistening pink lips, as if denying ourselves is a means of foreplay.

I have a better idea.

Slipping her silk pajama pants off entirely is simple enough. The panties are slightly more challenging, so as to not wake her. But in the end we triumph.

We bring the lace to our face, growling and feeling our cock dribble precum onto the edge of her bed as we inhale the intoxicating scent of her cunt.

Our hand goes to her pussy again, and this time, there's no hesitation. She whimpers as we cup her heated, slick cunt, feeling her arousal wet and sticky against our hand. We tease a finger up between her lips, dragging her moisture to her clit and slowly, gently, circling the little nub.

Her whimpering catches, releases, catches again. Her hips rise, and her nipples tighten to swollen little points. We wrap the panties around our pulsing cock, stroking the material up and down our veined shaft.

We sink a finger into her tight little hole.

So wet.

So fucking eager.

So fucking quit with the motherfucking poetics and FUCK HER already.

Stop talking.

Stop being a pussy.

Shut up.

Feel how fucking tight she is? I bet she's never had a cock here before.

We stroke our cock faster, rubbing the lace panties against the underside of our swollen head as we push our finger in and out, rolling her clit with our thumb.

Her slumbering whimpers catch again. Our cock grows even harder. Her tight, silken walls clamp down around our finger as her brow caves and her butt lifts from the bed.

Having a nice dream, princess…?

When she comes, so do we, grunting as our balls tighten and our cum pumps in thick ropes into the lace. Her body trembles, her breath both heavy and soft at the same time as her back arches with her orgasm.

But she still doesn't wake.

After we’ve tucked our cock back into our pants, we gently pull her pajama bottoms back up and button her top.

It's a crime against humanity to cover those parts of her up, you know.

No argument here.

We pull the covers back up and over her, a hint of something that might be a smile touching our lips as she snuggles back into them.

We should go.

Not yet…

Slowly, we lift the sticky, ruined panties still clutched in our fist. We dab at them with our finger, coating it in our cum before our eyes drop to her sleeping form.

That same finger slides over her lips, smearing our cum across them. She stirs a little, and when we pull our hand away, her mouth opens slightly.

Her tongue drifts out, running over her lips before she slips back to stillness.

A smile spreads over our face.

Keep a little of us inside you, princess. We’ll see you soon.

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9

EVELINA

As the car winds up the dark, wooded mountainside driveway to the looming gates of Blackbriar Hall, I feel like a condemned prisoner taking their final steps to the gallows. My pulse jumps erratically in my veins, my heart beating against my chest like it's trying to break free and run back to any semblance of normalcy.

This isn't you, my heart screams as it battles to escape. *What are you doing?!*

Simple. I'm doing *what I have to*.

I got a text message earlier tonight from Boris, one of the handful of my father's loyalists who ended up going to Russia with him when he was banished. Apparently, although my father is unharmed, someone shot up his car last night while he and a few of his men were eating dinner at a restaurant.

Not to mention, Diego's threatened *Roman* as well. And Val.

So here I am, pulse racing, skin hot and sweaty inside the mask covering the top half of my face, as the black SUV rolls to a stop at the heavy, ominous gates.

The Uber I took only got as far as a checkpoint of Syndicate men at the base of the mountain. There, after presenting my invitation, I was given this plain, featureless white mask and was transferred to the back seat of the black Range Rover, its windows tinted, and driven the rest of the way up

the winding road to the very top, where Blackbriar Hall sits like some villain's lair from a horror movie.

The gates noiselessly slide open and the Range Rover glides through, making my heart skip a little as I peer through the blacked-out windows at the massive home.

The Gilded Age mountaintop manor looks something out of a nightmare version of *The Great Gatsby*—huge, towering, built from dark gray stone. Its sinister appearance is made even worse by the low lights illuminating it from the base. The flickering torches on either side of the wide stone staircase leading up to the front door don't help, either.

I still don't really know what's going to happen here tonight. But the internet is awash with rumors about it. Some, like the ones that claim the Syndicate eats babies or engages in demonic blood sacrifice, I'm sure I can ignore with confidence. Val told me before how he's done some odd Syndicate work for his brother, and never once did he mention anything as insane as that. And he would have.

But mixed in amongst the wild rumors, I got at least some idea what to expect.

As a prospective initiate, I'm going to be paired with a senior member of the organization called an "Adept". If I make it through the initiation, I'll be referred to as an Acolyte, and I'll be bound to the Adept who initiated me, sort of like a pledge in a sorority or fraternity.

What the precise initiation process *entails*, though, remains a mystery. The most common theory that I've read online talks about Acolytes being forced to face their worst fears, or do something that terrifies them. Like, if you have severe arachnophobia, maybe you'll be locked in a box of spiders or something.

But it's all speculation. In my hours and *hours* of combing through conspiracy theory subs on Reddit and on other forums, there wasn't a single credible contributor who could prove they had ever been to an initiation.

Not for nothing, this is the *other* terrifying thing about Syndicate initiations: there *are no* failures.

Not because everyone gets in. But because if you *don't*…well…

You can't exactly go on Reddit and blab about what you saw.

Because you don't *live to do so*.

Allegedly.

Oddly, I'm not that scared about that part. Because one of the other common rumors is that the person who invites you to the initiation is your Adept.

Which means Vaughn is going to be mine.

Yes, that's a chilling thought, especially after what happened in the woods, and the lingering memories of his vicious eyes, jet black aura, and slippery, bloodied fingers wrapped tight around my neck.

At the same time, though, we're not strangers. Vaughn knows me. He knows I'm one of Val's best friends. Tonight might get terrifying, and who knows what fear I might be forced to face.

But I'm positive he's not going to *kill me*.

Masked guards, dressed all in black and carrying sidearms, check my invitation again before wordlessly waving me up the steps to the open front door.

Halfway up, I hear a sharp "*Psssst*!" Turning, I see a young woman in a white mask identical to mine running up the steps toward me. I'm in a black, long-sleeved warm-up top and yoga pants; she's wearing black sneakers, also yoga pants, and a hoodie.

I mean, the invitation *did* say to wear clothes we could "move in".

When she gets closer, I recognize the bright green eyes through her mask.

"*Gabby?*" I hiss quietly.

She flashes me a quick grin before leaning close and shaking her head. "No names," she mutters.

I nod, shivering. "Right. Sorry."

I gulp, turning to look again at the menacing, huge mansion towering above us. Two guards flank the massive front doors, both in plain black Bauta Venetian masks that cover their entire faces, the jaw and chin parts jutting outward.

"*Creepy*," Gabby murmurs quietly.

I nod, shivering as a violent tremor ripples through me. I glance at her, my lip catching between my teeth. "Are you worried?"

She hesitates a moment, then shakes her head. "Well…*no*. But…" Her exposed mouth twists as she lowers her voice. "Okay, I'm sort of friends with my Adept…the girl who invited me." She winces almost apologetically. "I know, I know. It sort of feels like cheating. But I swear she hasn't told me anything about what might go down here tonight. But we go back a long way, so… I don't think she's going to be *that* hard on me."

I exhale. "The stuff I read online…"

Gabby's slender throat works. "Right? Demonic blood sacrifice? *Cannibalism*? I mean, that's all bullshit, for sure. My friend would *never* be involved with that, let alone invite me."

I nod. "Yeah, but the facing your fears part…"

"*Snakes*," Gabby mumbles, shivering. "Motherfucking *snakes*. But my friend isn't a sadist, so, again…" She shrugs. "I'm not *that* worried." Her brow pinches under the mask. "How about you?"

"My fear?"

I've thought about that. I mean, I don't *love* spiders or creepy crawlies. Not big on heights, either.

But I'm not sure if either of those is my "biggest" fear. I'm not actually sure what that *would* be.

Gabby shakes her head. "No, I mean who invited you?"

Fear coils and twists inside me.

"I—"

“Ladies?”

We both jerk around when we hear the deep male voice. One of the two guards at the front doors to the house has taken a few steps down toward us, his black Bauta mask chilling as he looks right at us. “The initiation is beginning shortly. It is not recommended that you be late.”

“Shit. Sorry,” Gabby mumbles for both of us, grabbing my wrist and tugging me after her up the steps.

The two men open the huge, heavy wood and wrought-iron front doors. I feel like we’re being ushered into a medieval castle.

Then we step inside, and my heart jumps when the doors shut behind us with a heavy thud.

“*Fuck*.”

It’s not until Gabby says it that I truly see where we’re standing.

Whoa.

I’ve been surrounded by wealth my entire life. So has Gabby. But the sheer opulence of the castle-like mansion we’ve just stepped into is next level.

“What is this, fucking *Versailles*?” Gabby mumbles. We both drop our heads back to stare up at the massive, almost triple-story grand entrance, complete with two curved staircases winding up to the second level and a fresco of angels and devils battling it out on the ceiling high above.

“Ms. Nikitin. Ms. De Luca.”

We both gasp at the sudden appearance of a man in a blood-red robe, a black and red Bauta mask covering his face and black gloves on his hands.

“Follow me.”

He bows as if he’s a butler escorting us into a dinner party, but it’s clearly a command, not a request.

“*So much for anonymity,*” Gabby mutters as we fall into step behind him.

He escorts us through more of the sprawling mansion, drawing us deeper into the ominous energy of the house. At last we step through a set of guarded doors into a large banquet space, the room ringed with columns, a balcony on the level above, and a glass ceiling above that.

At the far end of the room there's a slightly raised dais. A simple black banner hangs on the wall behind it, emblazoned with the same venom-green design that was on the invitation: a dagger pointing down, surrounded by a halo of light.

There's maybe twenty other people dressed similarly to us milling around, both men and women. Aside from some super quiet whispering between a few of the initiates, the room is silent.

"*What happens now?*" I mumble to Gabby.

She swallows heavily, turning to me and shaking her head. "Not sure—"

We both jump a little at the heavy, rhythmic *thunk-thunk-thunk*. The man in blood-red robes who escorted us in a moment ago steps onto the dais, now holding a heavy staff in his hand. He taps it heavily on the ground again, instantly grabbing the attention of everyone in the room.

"Welcome initiates," he says in a deep, bass-heavy voice. "In a moment, you will meet your Adept, to whom you are a prospective Acolyte. Some of you know your Adepts. Some of you *think* you do. Several of you don't know them at all. But regardless of which camp you fall into, know this…"

The room is *silent*, every breath held and every eye wide as we stare at the masked speaker.

"Tonight is going to be one of the most difficult nights of your lives. The warning in the invitation you received was not hyperbole. Tonight will involve *serious* risk to your well-being…perhaps your very life."

My pulse skips as a cold sweat creeps down my spine.

"There is no going back now," the man continues in a voice devoid of emotion. "As stated in your invitations, attendance constitutes consent. There are twenty-five of you present here tonight…"

A long moment of silence descends over the frozen initiates.

“And roughly three quarters of you will be eliminated from consideration before the evening is over.”

Jesus.

A sharp tremble ripples through my body. I glance over at Gabby, whose teeth are gnawing at her bottom lip.

“You will now be met by your Adepts. Go with them and do whatever they ask. Refusal to comply will result in immediate removal from the initiation.”

He tilts his head back, looking up at the glass ceiling high above.

“*Per silentium. Per sanguinem*.”

Through silence. Through blood.

Suddenly, a heavy door swings open behind us. We all turn, and my heart starts pounding harder when a number of people emerge, all in black and wearing black Bauta masks adorned with venom-green filigree.

A tall guy a few yards away from Gabriella and me is the first to find his Adept.

“Let’s go,” the equally tall but much more muscular man in the black and green Bauta mask growls. Gabby and I glance at each other nervously before we turn back and see the Adept leading the initiate out of the room.

A red-haired girl is next, whose terror is visible even through her mask when her Adept, a tall, athletic brunette woman, steps in front of her and wordlessly crooks a finger for the initiate to follow.

My pulse races as I watch initiate after initiate getting pulled from the room.

Gabby gasps audibly next to me, making my head snap to the side. I gawk at the *huge*, broad-shouldered figure looming over her, staring menacingly down into her stunned face.

Didn’t she say her Adept was a *girl*?

Just as I think that, Gabby's big green eyes get even bigger behind her mask, her mouth falling open.

"Wait, I—"

"*Change of plans*," the man's dark, deep, slightly amused voice purrs from behind his black and venom-green Bauta mask.

Gabriella's face goes pale. "But—"

"You either come with me *right now*," the man growls in a low, dangerous tone, "or else there's the fucking door."

The man leans closer and whispers in her ear. Even from here, I see the fear ripple violently through her body.

Her throat bobs. Then, slowly, she nods.

The man towering over her chuckles darkly behind his mask. He turns, gestures with his hand, and a now *terrified*-looking Gabriella briefly glances at me with sheer panic in her eyes before she follows him through the side door.

What the heck just happened?

I don't have time to dwell on the question. One by one, the initiates leave with their Adepts.

…Until quite suddenly, I realize I'm alone in the room.

My heart skips in my chest, my clammy hands shaking at my sides. I rub my thumbs against my index and middle fingers as a tight knot forms in my stomach.

I turn, looking around the utterly empty room, wondering if maybe Vaughn decided that I could go screw myself concerning this whole thing. There's no guards. No man in red with the staff. No other initiates or Adepts.

Nobody.

"You made a *grave* mistake coming here tonight, Evelina."

The gasp curdles and dies in my throat as I whirl to face him. Vaughn has appeared on the dais, staring right at me. He's wearing a black Bauta mask adorned with venom-green filigree, like the others. But I still know it's him. I can sense his eyes on me even though they're lost in the shadows of the mask from this far away.

The knot in my stomach pulls tighter as he slowly steps from the dais and walks over until he's right in front of me. I can see those icy blues now, stabbing into me and flaying my soul open.

"I…" I swallow heavily. "The invitation—"

"I thought you'd be smart enough to ignore it," he growls. His head slowly tips to the side. "Apparently I was mistaken."

I shiver. "Vaughn—"

"*No*."

He interrupts me, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Don't say my name," he hisses. "I'm not your little friend's brother here. You don't know a fucking thing *about* me here. But you're about to find out."

I tremble, gasping quietly as he lifts his hand and wraps his fingers around my throat again, like that's where they belong. My entire body twitches and tingles with nervous, terrified energy.

"Your safe word is midnight."

Fear twists sharply inside me.

"My…" A tremble trickles down my spine. "*Safe word*?"

"Do you know what's going to happen here tonight, Evelina?"

I'm freaking *shaking*, an uncontrollable tremor wracking my body. My throat bobs against his fingers and palm as I swallow, trying to slow my racing heart.

"My…my worst fears," I croak. "You're going to make me face them."

Vaughn’s masked face is utterly devoid of any emotion as it cants to the side.

“And what is that?”

I go silent, and a low, dark chuckle rumbles from behind his mask.

“Follow me.”

He brushes past me and calmly walks toward another door at the back of the big banquet room. I'm rooted to the ground.

“I won’t be repeating myself tonight, Evelina.”

I jolt, quickly moving to catch up to him.

Vaughn leads me through the door and down a dark hallway to another door. When he opens it, cool air teases over me before we step out into the night, lit only by the silver moon hanging low in the inky, cloud-dotted sky.

A ripple finger-walks up my spine as I glance around at the gnarled, bare branches of a twisted tree, looming over a collection of statues, gargoyles, crosses, and a few small stone houses.

I go still.

No, not statues and houses.

Graves and mausoleums.

We’re standing in a crumbling, walled *graveyard*.

I startle as the door shuts behind me with a heavy thud. My eyes dart up to Vaughn’s masked face as he stands over me, looking down into my very soul.

“I’m going to give you one. Last. Chance.”

I shiver. “I…I thought attendance constituted—”

“Shut the fuck up and listen, Evelina,” he murmurs. “This is your very last chance. None of this should be taken lightly. Should you survive,

admittance to the Syndicate is for *life*. This is not a holiday. It's not a fun social club for when you're bored."

He leans down slightly, eyes glinting like wicked blue-tinged diamonds in the shadowy eyeholes of his mask. I shiver as his slight spicy, earthy, masculine scent teases over me.

"Are you *sure* you're willing to sacrifice your own blood to help a shit-stain of a man who'd sell you out for a bottle of cheap vodka."

My mouth twists. "He… He's my father."

"Fathers are highly overrated," he snaps back.

For the first time, I realize he's also dressed in comfortable clothes—a black hoodie that fits snugly across his broad shoulders, black track pants, black sneakers.

Why does it feel like we're about to go for a jog?

"This is your last warning. Don't do this for someone else. Do it for *you*, or don't do it at all."

The silence hangs heavily between us as I take a shaky breath.

"I'm ready," I say softly.

"I disagree," he growls. "Regardless: remember your safe word. Midnight, and this all stops."

A tremor slips up my spine.

What all stops?

"But if it stops, it *all* stops. You go home, and you are *done* with the Syndicate. Needless to say, we're done with you, too."

The implication is clear: if I tap out, I'm done, and I can kiss any chance of the Syndicate helping my father goodbye.

I can also be sure that Diego Torvallés will make good on his threat.

There's only one way forward.

“*I understand*,” I whisper hoarsely.

Vaughn doesn’t reply. Another long few seconds tick by, then I jolt sharply at the jarring, angry caw of a crow somewhere in the night.

“Tonight, Evelina,” Vaughn says evenly, rolling his neck and cracking his knuckles, “you’re going to face your greatest fear.”

My brows knit. “I…I don’t think I know what that—”

“Sex.”

The word hits me like a slap across the face. Reality twists at the edges, and a siren starts to whine in the back of my head.

“What you fear is *sex*,” he continues in an even, emotionless voice.

“N-no, I—”

“So tonight, I’m going to fuck you.”

The moonlight dims. All sound fades until all I can hear is the high-pitched whine in my ears. All I can feel is the cold, damp air settling over my skin.

All I can see is the sharp, venomous, glint in his brutal blue eyes.

“I will be rough. I will not be gentle.”

The ground turns to ice under my shoes, freezing me in place as pure dread creeps up my body.

“*I will hurt you*, Evelina.”

Holy hell.

Holy freaking HELL.

My pulse roars. My legs shake. My lip trembles as I look up wide-eyed into his uncaring, masked face.

“*Midnight*,” he says quietly. “Use it, or I will *ruin you*.”

The darkness itself seems to throb around him like a black aura. I don’t realize I’m backing away from him until I feel a twig crack like a dry bone

under my foot.

“Now, if I were you, I would *run*.”

I go still, staring at him with pure adrenaline flooding my system.

“Run, Evelina. And run fast. Because when I catch you, I’m going to fuck you until you *break*.”

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10

EVELINA

RUN.

RUN, you idiot.

But I can't. Half because of the pure fear exploding through my body, and half because of the sheer disbelief that any of this is happening.

This cannot be real.

I slowly back away from this man I'm just now realizing I *truly* do not know. I'm aware that I view pretty much the whole world through rose-colored glasses, looking for and assuming the best because that's just how I am.

But it's suddenly hitting me how dangerously misguided that is with Vaughn.

"*And if I say no?*" I croak, my voice cracking. "If…if I tell you to stop—"

"There's only one word that will stop me," he growls deeply. "Nothing else will do a fucking thing once we begin."

"I—"

My mouth snaps shut before I can blurt that I've never done this before.

My first time can't be this way—chased by a masked madman through a freaking graveyard, in the shadow of a haunted house.

“We both know you’re a virgin, Evelina.”

The color drains from my face.

“N-no, I—”

“And here I thought you were going to try to use that virginity as a shield, thinking it might stop me tonight. Spoiler: it won’t. But go ahead,” he murmurs, his eyes glinting. “*Lie to me*. It’ll just make me even harder when those lies bleed all over my cock. And you *will* bleed for me, princess.”

My eyes go wide in the gloom.

“*Now* would be a good time to use that word,” he rasps darkly. “And yet,” he continues, “you’re still not saying it. You’re also not *running*,” he snarls quietly. “On one. Three…”

“Vaughn,” I choke. “*Wait*—”

“Two…”

“WAIT!” I scream shrilly, holding my hands up, like *that* is going to stop him. “Hang on, I—”

“One.”

There’s no pause. Not one last second to think about the madness I’ve stumbled into. The word has barely left his mouth before his huge body lurches into action, bolting toward me.

I scream and turn to run. But before I can take a single step, pain explodes through my scalp as I’m yanked back *by my hair*. A cry erupts from my mouth as I’m wrenched off my feet, landing hard on the ground. The breath leaves my body in a whoosh, and stars blink in front of my eyes as a roaring fills my ears.

Vaughn's shadow looms over me, surrounded by the crumbling gravestones and mausoleums. I whimper as I look up into the menacing, masked face of a man I’m quickly realizing might be a fucking *monster*.

A predator.

Which makes *me* the prey.

With a cry, I roll away from him, scuffing my elbows on the ground and wincing in pain as I try to scramble to my feet and run away.

But I already know that this isn't a chase at all. I've already been caught.

I was caught the second I set foot in this nightmarish house. No, before that. I was caught as soon as I got into Andrés' car the other night.

This isn't a chase.

It's an inevitability.

I scream when his big hand grabs my ankle, yanking hard. Another cry flies from my terrified lips as I go slamming back to the ground. I kick out, scissoring my legs and thrashing my feet in a blind panic. Before I can even land a single blow, he grabs both my ankles and violently drags me across the ground.

"*STOP! Stop it!!"*

I scream and choke into the dirt and leaves, clawing at them with torn fingernails. My pulse jangles as I kick back again, screaming into the crushed leaves beneath me, even as I realize how futile those screams are.

I expected to be out of my element when I came here tonight.

But I never in a thousand years expected *this*.

No one is coming to save me.

Nothing will stop him, except the one word I can't bring myself to say.

And I don't know why that is.

Without warning, I'm suddenly rolled violently onto my back. Before I can say a word, he grabs the front waist of my yoga pants and my panties in his fist. With a swift yank, he rips them roughly over my hipbones and down my thighs.

The sheer violence of it sucks the air from my lungs, my eyes wide with horror.

Then a basic survival instinct catches fire inside me.

The instinct to *fight back*.

I kick and thrash, screaming and clawing as he moves on top of me. His strong hand wraps around my throat, his emotionless mask leering down at me.

A savageness I've never once felt before explodes inside me. Every muscle screams and rebels, my legs kicking and my arms flailing, trying to hit or scratch or slap him any way I can.

An explosive heat thunders within me, roaring through my veins like a drug as I claw and scratch at him. My hand finally connects, and Vaughn grunts as the mask is knocked askew.

One glinting, venomously blue eye stabs into me before he reaches up and rips the mask away entirely. His dark hair falls messily across his forehead, his chiseled, sculpted jaw grinding dangerously as his eyes blaze into mine.

His face is so intensely *blank*. So devoid of humanity. It's like I'm looking into the swirling emptiness of malevolence itself.

Eye to eye.

Mortal to monster.

A broken whimper splinters in my chest when Vaughn's long fingers tighten around my throat, his icy blue eyes glinting dangerously in the darkness as the crow screams in the night.

"*Use your word, princess,*" he rasps, his eyes dark as a twitch pulses in his jaw.

I shudder as he grinds his hips against me, pushing his thigh against my bare core. I tremble as the roughness of his denim scrapes against my thighs, edging closer to my sex.

"Use your safe word," Vaughn growls, "or so help me God, I will fuck this cunt until you can't walk for a *week*."

My hand lashes out at his face before I even consider the consequences. My palm slaps his face sharply, and my nails rake down his cheek, leaving bright red claw marks on his skin.

My eyes widen in horror.

“*Vaughn*—!”

A cry tears from my throat as he grabs my wrists and slams them above my head. He keeps them pinned there with one hand as he reaches for the neckline of my shirt with the other. I shriek when he grabs hold and yanks violently, ripping the fabric down to my navel before his hand grabs the front of my bra.

My body arches off the ground as he viciously tugs, ripping the pink lace and tossing it aside before his eyes drop to my small breasts. I squirm and shudder under his gaze, my pale nipples tightening to points as my upper back writhes.

He moves so quickly, I don’t even have time to scream. But suddenly, his mouth is on my breasts, and a choked squeal erupts from my throat when his lips wrap around a throbbing nipple.

Then he *bites down*.

HARD.

I scream as a dark, dangerous zap bursts deep in my core. He bites down again, viciously, like he’s trying to take my freaking nipple right off.

My arms strain against his grip on my wrists. Vaughn savagely mauls and chews first one nipple and then the other, alternating between punishing bites and roughly running his tongue over the throbbing, aching points of my nipples.

A liquefying feeling surges between my legs, melting through my core as he savages my breasts and pins me to the ground like his prey.

No.

No no no, to all of it.

No to the heat between my thighs. *No* to the achy, needy sensation slithering through my core as this psychopath brutalizes me.

No to the rush of adrenaline humming through my veins, as if I’m hungry for more.

Just no.

Vaughn growls as he sucks and bites on one of my tender nipples, making me thrash and choke out a broken, needy cry.

“*Please*!” I sob. “Please stop! STOP!”

“*Beg me, princess*,” he groans into my breasts, biting down hard and making me squeal sharply. “You know it only gets me fucking *harder*.”

He roughly shoves my legs apart and pushes himself between them. He drops one hand to his belt, yanking it open as my pulse jangles in my ribcage.

This can’t be happening.

This isn’t how I'm supposed to lose my virginity.

“Say the word, Evelina,” he snarls in an almost human tone, pushing down his darkness just enough to give me one last warning. “*Say the fucking word*.”

Inside, I’m *screaming* it.

Midnight.

MIDNIGHT MIDNIGHT MIDNIGHT.

And yet my vocal cords won't obey, whether from stupidity, terror, or some deranged act of defiance.

I flinch when Vaughn grabs my panties and yoga pants tangled around my thighs, and a sharp gasp chokes from my throat as he viciously yanks them down past my knees. That survival instinct snaps to life inside me again, my feet kicking and thrashing, even though it’s pointless against his strength.

Vaughn is utterly heedless of my clawing and screaming as he pulls my sneakers off. He rips my pants all the way off, tossing them aside before he roughly slaps my legs apart and inserts himself between them.

I scream and claw and slap at his chest as he looms over me. My fingers catch in the neck hole of his T-shirt, which rips away from his body.

I jerk my hand back, and a gasp lodges in my throat at the leering faces of terror and death that suddenly snarl and grin at me.

Jesus.

He's *covered* in tattoos: skulls, reapers, snakes, daggers. Ghastly, ghoulish scenes dripping in darkness and blood are inked all across his grooved, chiseled, torso.

Monstrosities leer down at me as the monster himself shoves his hand between my legs.

My eyes bulge.

"*No, wait! Please—*!"

I *squeal* as Vaughn sinks two thick fingers deep inside me. My back arches off the ground at the sudden intrusion, my legs flailing as I claw at his rippling forearm with both hands.

But…God help me…

I'm *wet.*

Slickly, *embarrassingly* wet.

My squeals, and the writhing and squirming aren't because I'm in pain. They're because those two thick fingers slide so easily into me.

Pure mortification explodes across my throbbing face.

"*My my my*," Vaughn rasps in the darkness, stabbing through the gauze of madness fogging my mind. "This greedy little princess cunt is leaking all over me, making a fucking *mess* of my fingers."

I shudder, my legs vainly trying to close as he roughly strokes his fingers in and out and scissors them. Lewd, loud, *wet* sounds echo mortifyingly in my ears as he thrusts them into me violently, making my insides tighten and clench.

I’ve done this a grand total of twice before, with Ethan. But it was more an awkward, fumbled *rubbing*, almost like he was petting a cat or trying to get a stain out of a couch cushion.

The sheer physical dominance that Vaughn exerts over me as he buries his thick fingers inside me and strokes with mad intensity is something else entirely.

Violent. Unhinged.

It should repulse me. Make me shut down and go bone-dry with horror.

Instead, it does the opposite.

I feel undone, like the ropes and the brakes that have been holding me back have finally been cut loose. Like I’m in a mad free fall with open arms.

I claw and slap at his arm, because I know I should. I'm supposed to hate this. But the loud, *squelching* sounds of my pussy dripping all over his fingers tells me how much of a lie that is and screams how broken I might be.

His fingers ram into me harder, faster, his growls filling my ears as he buries his face in my neck.

I cry out when he bites down on my throat like a freaking animal, his teeth scraping over my skin as I squeal and writhe, feeling myself spasming around his intruding fingers.

“Your virgin cunt is so *tight*,” he murmurs, lowering his mouth to my breast. “Like it’s going to squeeze my fingers right off.”

My breath catches in anticipation this time, then he savagely bites down again on my throbbing, erect nipple.

His fingers start to thrust faster, curling deep against that electric spot inside as my legs begin to shake.

My pulse starts to thunder out of control as my body stiffens.

My core clenches, my insides contracting around his thrusting, thick fingers.

No.

No no no.

I can’t come like this.

I *can’t freaking come*, here, on the ground, with this psychopath shoving his fingers into my pussy like he’s trying to murder it.

But the more I try to tell myself it’s not about to happen, the closer I get. The more that slithering, coiling sensation tightens in my belly as my eyes roll back.

I’m going to come.

I’m going to COME—

Vaughn’s fingers slide from between my legs. I choke on the broken sensation crumbling inside me as the buildup evaporates. My brow caves as I bite down hard on my bottom lip to stop my disappointment from showing.

My eyes snap to his and I watch with a thrumming sensation vibrating through my veins as he brings his fingers to his mouth. His lips wrap around the glistening digits, and my face throbs with heat when he groans deeply.

“*Mmm, princess*,” he growls. “I think you might be my new favorite flavor.”

He sits back on his haunches and starts to tug off the torn remnants of his shirt.

I see my chance.

I roll, scrabbling for purchase, trying to get to my feet. But before I can even lift myself an inch, a big hand wraps like iron around my ankle, pulling a scream from my throat.

“*Not. So. Fast.*”

I cry out, clawing as he drags me back to him first by the ankles and then the tattered remnants of my shirt and bra, which rip the rest of the way off

under his brutal grip.

Suddenly, *fire* explodes across my butt. A vicious *SMACK* hangs in the air.

He just *spanked me*.

I scream when he does it again, pinning me to the ground and raining slaps with his unyielding palm down on my butt. I twist and cry out, squirming on the ground as Vaughn spanks the *hell* out of me, until all I can feel is the throbbing hot, fiery sting of his hand against my flesh.

"*Please!!"* I sob, writhing in his unyielding grip. He spanks me again and *again*, until tears are streaming down my face and I don't even recognize the half-screamed *moans* that wrench from my throat.

Horror spreads like poison through my veins.

What was that?!

I'm not *enjoying* this.

I'm *enduring it*.

I'm shaking from head to toe when he violently shoves me onto my back. I wince when my butt hits the ground, then cry out when Vaughn grabs my thighs and yanks me to him over the rough dirt.

He rips his belt open and tugs down his zipper, then reaches inside.

"Slow down!" I blurt, pawing at his hands as if that might stop him. "Please—"

Vaughn shoves his pants and boxers down over his hips.

What.

The.

Actual.

HELL.

My brain shorts out for a second as my eyes land on the *massive*, swollen thickness that springs out of his jeans, bobbing heavily.

He’s *huge*.

Vaughn wraps a fist around the base, making his dick bulge as his hand slides up and down the veined shaft. He strokes himself a few more times before grabbing my thighs and yanking them up, my legs spreading to either side of his hips.

Wait wait wait wait—

“Vaughn, please!!”

“I warned you. Don't get me harder, princess.”

Panic consumes me as I stare in disbelief at his *massive* dick as he slowly fists it right over my pussy.

No.

There’s *no way* that’s going to fit inside me. It's impossible.

He’s going to split me in half.

He’s going to destroy my pussy.

He's going to hurt me.

Without warning, he *slaps* the swollen head of his cock against my pussy.

A spasm ripples through me, turning my core to liquid fire as my throat tightens.

Oh God no…

He does it again and again, his big dick slapping against my wet clit until a broken, needy sound wrenches from my chest.

Then he *spits* right on my pussy, making me even wetter.

Something unhinged inside me breaks free, like a piece of me that I’ve kept walled up in the shadows suddenly escaping its prison.

Vaughn slaps the heavy underside of his dick against my pussy again, and I whimper when he slides the big head through his spit, rubbing it against my clit. My body jolts, my back arching and my thighs shaking as he rubs my

swollen button with his slippery dick before he suddenly drags the head down, sliding it between my lips.

"*Wait*—!"

His thick head presses against my opening as my breath comes in frantic, tight little bursts.

"*Wait! Please! Stop*—"

"No."

"Vaughn!"

I try to scramble away from that *monster* cock that I know is going to split me in half. But he wraps his hand around my throat and squeezes, stopping me. I choke out a broken sound, my hands clawing and flailing, slapping at his arms, his chest—

Vaughn grunts as his palm connects with my cheek, an heated fire suddenly ripples across my face.

Holy shit.

My brain tries to process the fact that that Vaughn just *slapped me*, and the *far worse* realization that it sent a bolt of achy, twisting need rippling violently through my core.

But my brain doesn't get a chance to process either idea fully, because the sting of his palm is still on my cheek as he suddenly rams every inch of his massive cock deep inside me.

I freaking *scream*.

I yell like I've been burned on a hot iron, my back arcing as my bruised, sore butt *levitates* off the ground. Fiery pain sears through me, making me cry out as Vaughn groans deeply, impaling me on his huge dick.

It feels like I've just been given a shot of pure adrenaline.

My senses are on high alert.

My pulse is racing.

Every physical sensation feels *too intense*.

The chilly night air on my skin. The rough scrape of the dirt and dead leaves underneath me. The pressure of the strong hand around my throat.

…The way I feel stretched *so freaking tight* around his thickness.

Mercifully, he just stays deep inside me for a second. Still, my breath chokes in my throat and my eyes roll back. My bare feet kick against the ground. My fingers rake down his muscled forearms as he holds me by the throat and hip, grinding his dick deep inside my pussy.

I'm so tight.

I'm so freaking *full*.

Too full.

He's too big. Too much.

He's going to *kill me* with this dick.

Just say the word.

Scream it, and this madness ends.

Midnight. Midnight. MIDNIGHT.

"Mmm, such a greedy, slutty little fuck hole," Vaughn growls in a husky tone.

My brow caves, my breath becoming haggard and rasping as he slides out and then pounds right back into me.

"*Please*—" I choke. "Slow d—"

I cry out, the broken sound alien to my ears as Vaughn brutally thrusts harder into me.

"This pussy belongs to me. Don't tell me how to fuck it," he snarls. "This isn't a fucking *date*, princess. I'm not here to make you come, in fact, I don't give a shit if you do or not. What I care about is *fucking*—"

A high, needy whine, in a voice that I don't recognize as my own, bursts unbidden from my lips, releasing itself into the night as he rams into me.

"*This*."

This time, I *know* I don't recognize the sound that erupts from my throat.

It's not pain. Not terror.

It's *desperate* need, deep and primal. And it scares the hell out of me as Vaughn slams his huge dick back into my poor, battered pussy.

"*Little.*"

I choke, my chest clenching when I feel him so deep that it feels like he's in the back of my throat. Pressure throbs inside me, the sensation of being so full taking my breath away.

"*Pussy,*" he rasps. "Until I empty every drop of my fucking cum inside it."

No one has *ever* come close to talking to me like this before.

Never been this cold, calloused, and uncaring.

That makes it even worse when the lewd wet sounds fill my ears as he pounds into my pussy like an animal, and when that achy, needy moan rips from my throat.

When my hips roll eagerly to meet his every thrust.

When I feel my pussy rippling and quivering around his thickness.

When he *spits on me again*, the drool hitting my chin and neck before he slaps my face once more with his palm.

Then my breasts, over and over, hitting my nipples as I scream and shudder and shake under him.

"*There's* a good cum whore," Vaughn snarls in a deep, rasping, demonic voice that sends me reeling. He pounds into me, one hand around my throat and the other raining slaps over my my breasts, my butt, and my pussy.

The terrifying faces of skulls and snakes and ghouls leer at me from his rippling body as his hand on my throat slides around my neck and his fingers snake into my hair. He grabs it in a fist and yanks, making me screech as he tugs my head back, exposing my neck.

“*Mmmm*, such a wet, tight little pussy. *My* tight little pussy,” he hisses against my throat through clenched teeth, thrusting into me with hard, fast, brutal strokes. The sheer size and force of his dick knocks the breath from my lungs, sending my bruised and battered ass scraping across the ground as he fills me over and over again.

But God help me, I want *more*.

More of the madness.

The pain. The humiliation.

The sweet agony, and the even sweeter release.

The more he gives, the more I want. The worse he inflicts, the harder I want it.

And that realization has me quivering and shaking as my whole world begins to tighten and coil.

“*Fuck*, princess,” he snarls in a deep, hungry tone. “Your sweet virgin blood feels so fucking good soaking my cock.”

The last resistance snaps inside me. The breath rushes out of me with a whooshing choke as my body starts to adjust and stretch and cling tight to his invading cock.

A broken, gasped surrender slams into me. For a second, as I look up and meet the brutal, icy blue glint in his eyes, it feels like I’m more exposed than I’ve ever been before. Not just because I *am* naked. It's like he, unlike anyone else, is finally seeing all of me.

Seeing the dark part inside me that I’ve kept hidden, even from myself.

And when he brutally thrusts into me, I come undone. Completely. Irreversibly.

Tears trickle from the corners of my eyes, but not from pain or humiliation.

It's because suddenly, unexpectedly, and unapologetically, I feel more alive than I ever have.

I shudder when Vaughn cups my face, his eyes glinting darkly as he wipes away my tears with his thumb.

“Don’t cry, little princess,” he murmurs, leaning close and letting his teeth graze the delicate curve of my neck. “*You’ll make me come.*”

His words drag like a knife point over my skin.

His teeth follow. Biting. Sucking. Eating me *alive*. His mouth everywhere: on my collarbone, my breasts, my nipples. His hands grasp my hips, lifting them as he pounds into me, hitting a spot inside that makes me start to shatter.

His thrusts become deeper, more violent, as if he’s trying to stab me to death with his cock. But the harder he pounds, the more tightly wound I become. The more he brutalizes my body, the more my insides turn to molten fire.

Vaughn sits back on his haunches, his hands holding my hips and lifting my butt off the ground as he thrusts into me like he hates me.

My toes curl and cramp up. My legs kick. A quivering trembling builds deep inside.

I desperately try to remind myself that I’m only doing this because I have to.

Because he’s *forcing me*.

But the terrifying truth is, *I like this*. And what really scares me is how much I’m craving his madness.

How much the pain turns me on.

I’m going to come.

My back scrapes against the ground. My hands claw and dig at his arms as he reaches down, wraps a hand around my throat, and *squeezes*.

My eyes roll back as my entire reality blurs and shatters.

Oh God…

Oh GOD.

“That’s it, come apart for me, slut.”

Smack.

His hand slaps my breasts, making my nipples scream in agony and pleasure as they tighten to points. He leans over and bites down hard on the same nipple, making me cry out as my pussy pulses around his huge dick when he rams into me again and again.

“You’re fucking *mine now*, my little cum whore,” he snarls. “You *belong to me*. This *cunt* belongs to me. Your pain and your pleasure belong to me. Your *cum* belongs to *me*.”

Slap.

Thrust.

Squelch.

Scream.

Whimper.

Sob.

Everything becomes a blur: his brutal hands, his vicious thrusts, owning me, consuming me, reducing me to dust as I shatter.

“Be a good little cum slut and *break* for me, princess.”

Oh God…

My body spasms and shakes as the orgasm slams into me like a hurricane making landfall.

I claw at him, my entire body twisting and writhing, grinding against his invading cock as I come harder than I ever have in *my life*.

Vaughn grunts as he pushes his dick as deep as he can get—deeper than it's been so far, and touching a place inside that makes me see stars. Then he pulls out, and fists his glistening, blood-streaked cock as he roars his release.

Cum sprays across my tummy in thick, hot, white ropes, splattering my pussy and my thighs and running in white rivulets down my hips. A second burst lands across my breasts, and a third splatters my chin as I whine and moan.

Covering me.

Marking me.

Destroying me.

I'm numb as I look down, and tremble when Vaughn slides a hand over my body, rubbing his cum and my blood into my skin.

"I told you your tears were going to make me come, princess."

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11

VAUGHN

FROM THE SECOND-FLOOR balcony that rings the banquet hall, I drag my eyes over the survivors standing quietly on the floor below.

Okay, “survivors” is a bit dramatic. None of the others is *dead*.

I don’t think so, anyway—though I do have a sneaking suspicion that Sebastian only invited his random initiate because he wanted someone to kill.

He’s not the only one who had ulterior motives tonight. I have…*questions* for Carson involving his prospective Acolyte. But they can wait.

For now, my gaze flicks over the seven remaining initiates out of the twenty-five we had at the beginning of the evening.

They all look like they’ve been through some shit. But Evelina looks like she’s been to war and back.

She’s wearing a new mask, her original sneakers that I managed to find, and a black peacoat I gave her, since the rest of her clothing was destroyed during our…*fun*. When we were done, her body looked like she really had just gone through battle: bruised, scratched, scraped, bitten, and streaked with blood and cum..

She’s trembling a little, barely standing upright. The initiate nearest her—Gabriella De Luca, who, curiously, has also passed tonight’s trials—creeps a little closer to Evelina and dips her head, whispering something. Evelina

quickly shakes her head, her throat bobbing heavily as she forces a wan, half-hearted smile to her face. Gabriella peers at her a little closer, her brow furrowing under her mask. Evelina just keeps looking straight ahead, swaying a little, like she's struggling to stay awake.

But instead of the smugness I should be feeling, given that it was *me* who made her come so hard that she's still barely fucking conscious now, all I feel is concern.

Not for her.

Please.

I'm not that human, as indicated by the activities of the past hour.

She knew her safe word. She could have tapped out any time she wanted.

But she didn't.

She took every thrust.

Every smack.

And she *liked it*.

A lot more than "liked", actually.

It wasn't supposed to play out this way. The point was to scare her and then watch her break and run away, *screaming* her safe word and never once looking back on me or the Syndicate.

But she didn't run. She didn't even really break. She just…*took it*.

All of it. All of *me*. All my darkness. No matter how much I fucking gave.

So, no. My concern isn't for *her*. My concern is that *she's still fucking here.*

I drum my fingers on the railing of the balcony, eying her and the others who've made it this far. But I'm not thinking about the initiation, or what these new Acolytes could mean for our organization.

I'm too busy replaying every single lurid detail of what just happened.

I don’t usually let go like that and release so much of my darkness. Not even close. It’s not that I’m embarrassed by my proclivities or what makes me hard.

It’s that I don’t trust myself to remain as *just me* if I do that. I know what lies inside me…or should I say "who".

They used to call it split personality. Today, it goes by the much more refined name of “dissociative identity disorder”.

Well, they can call it whatever they like. The bottom line is, I don’t live alone in my head. I have *roommates*.

It’s not like in the movies. I don’t have conversations out loud with myself in different fucking voices.

Well…mostly.

I wouldn't even say mine for the most part are distinct personalities. They’re more like…moods. But they’re moods that take on a life their own.

They’re all manageable.

…Except for one.

Demon.

He’s the worst of me. The darkest, most depraved, hateful, volatile, cruel and dangerous part. When the others come, it’s more a conversation until I dismiss them. When Demon comes knocking, it’s anyone’s guess what will happen.

Sometimes, we’re a “we”.

Other times, I lose all control and he takes over completely. Those are the times that I wake up in a place I don’t recognize, covered in fuck-knows-whose blood.

It's why I hold myself to a firm, disciplined code of conduct. It’s why I don’t let myself loose, like I just did with Evelina.

I thought for sure he would come out to play in full, taking over completely, especially since sex—*rough* sex in particular—is usually a dissociative

thing for me, and a prime moment for Demon to emerge and take control.

But tonight, it was just Evelina and me.

I groan inwardly, feeling my dick twitch as my eyes land on her, standing there swaying in the middle of the room, my peacoat wrapped around her body.

I can still feel the way she shattered for me. Still see the glisten of tears in the corners of her eyes and smell the mix of coppery blood and the sweetness of her cunt in the air.

My balls tighten.

Fuck me.

I want *more*.

All seven of the remaining initiates stiffen when Cassius steps onto the small dais, draped in his dramatic blood-red robes, holding his fucking staff. Cash isn't true inner circle like Seb, Carson, or Gideon, but we still go way back, and he's a close advisor.

He also gets off on spooking initiates, between the robes and the ultra-creepy voice and banging his staff on the floor like a fucking wizard.

"Congratulations," he growls, his voice purposefully devoid of all emotion. "You've survived the initiation." He lets his masked gaze drag over the group of initiates. "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers," he murmurs. "*And sisters*," he adds, bastardizing the original Shakespeare as he dips his chin toward Evelina and Gabriella.

Cassius has a real flair for the fucking dramatic.

"Now," he continues, "the real hardship begins."

I don't miss the shudder that ripples across Evelina's slender shoulders.

"From this moment on, you are no longer initiates. You are Acolytes. And for the next three months, your Adept is your *god*. You will worship them. You will do anything and everything that they ask of you without hesitation. There will be no abject cruelty or harm. Your Adept doesn't want you to

die. But they do want to find out if you *would* die for the Syndicate if you were asked to."

I find myself nodding as my hand slides up to my throat, fingering the mark of the Syndicate inked into my skin.

"You've made it this far," Cash continues. "Ours is an organization that goes back *centuries*." His masked eyes are unblinking as his gaze sweeps over each of the Acolytes in turn. "At the end of three months, should you survive, you'll be given a tattoo. You will then be a member for life of the Obsidian Syndicate."

I watch Evelina shudder again. But this time, after the moment passes, her shoulders straighten, and her body stops its weak swaying. Slowly, haltingly, she turns her head, as if sensing my eyes on her.

I smile slightly despite myself as her face lifts. Because even from up here, I can see the flinty gray of her eyes flashing as they land on me, and the shiver that ripples down her spine before she quickly looks back to the dais.

"*Per silentium. Per sanguinem*," Cassius growls. He dips his chin. "Your turn."

"*Per silentium. Per sanguinem*," the assembled new Acolytes mumble haltingly, cementing their fate.

God help her.

Cassius taps his staff. Some guards emerge from the shadows and begin to usher the seven Acolytes out of the ballroom. Just before she goes to leave, I see her turn slightly and raise her face to me.

I let my cold, emotionless gaze stab into her, ready to watch her scamper away to safety.

But instead, she looks me dead in the eye and her lips pull to a tight, grimacing, dare I say *defiant* smile. As if to say "fuck you, you didn't break me".

Maybe I haven't.

Yet.

But there’s *plenty* of time.

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12

EVELINA

I DON'T KNOW if I quite recognize the face in the mirror that stares back at me.

It's *different*.

There's shock in the eyes. Haggardness and humiliation. Pain and fear. But there's strength, too. There's a determination that I'm not sure I saw in them the last time I looked in this mirror. Was that really just earlier today?

I shake slightly as I take a breath, holding it for as long as I dare before slowly, haltingly, letting it out. Then I undo the buttons of the jacket I'm wearing and let it slip from my shoulders and fall to the floor of my bedroom.

Holy God…

I look like I've just spent a year as a prisoner of war. Vicious, nasty-looking marks cover my body. Thumb prints on my hips, legs, and torso. Impact bruises on my thighs. When I turn to glance over my shoulder, I choke at the brutality painted in blue, purple and black across my butt.

Bite marks dot my neck, my collarbones, and the slopes of my breasts. And my nipples…*Jesus*. I look like Bianca after breastfeeding for months.

Raw, swollen and *chewed on*.

Frankly, I look like someone beat the living hell out of me and left me to die in a ditch. My hair is a tangled mess, with bits of twigs and leaves still

caught in it. Scratch marks crisscross my chest and body. God knows when those happened.

There's blood on my inner thighs, and streaks of clear, dried fluid across my tummy and breasts.

It's all so *violent*, especially juxtaposed against the room I'm standing in.

There's a reason my friends call me a Disney princess and Val makes jokes about me singing to woodland creatures. They all see me as a naive, innocent, sheltered girl.

They're not *wrong*, per se. And my fondness for this room doesn't exactly cast doubt on that opinion.

Pink walls. A fluffy pink and white throw rug. Gauzy pink curtains hanging down from the rail of my white four-poster bed.

And then, reflected in the mirror, in a pink frame complete with a legit cutout of a crown at the top, is *me*, in my current state.

Broken. Savaged.

Defiled.

Naked, battered and bruised, and covered in blood and cum.

For a second it's all too much, and my eyes blur with hot tears as I shake on my legs, pressing my hand to the glass.

What the hell did I just do?

You're not supposed to lose your virginity that way, not to a man like *him*.

You're not supposed to *like* things like that.

Brutality.

Humiliation.

Pain.

Being pushed to your breaking point, and then shoved right past it.

Part of me wants to scream and yell and break things. I want to smash this glass with its reflection of the perfect little princess doll, all smashed and broken. That part wants to be *so freaking angry* that I went twenty-three years, barely having a boyfriend, hardly doing anything beyond groping and making out, and then being plunged headfirst into Vaughn's madness.

Complete, unhinged, *madness*.

And yet, at the same time…

I take another shaky breath and close my eyes, pressing my fingers against the glass.

I'm not.

Angry, that is.

I want to be. I want *so badly* to hate Vaughn and the things he did to me. I want to call it assault, or rape, or something just as vile to match the vileness he inflicted on me.

So why didn't you stop it?

I go still in the silence of the room, standing naked and broken as I lean my head on my hand against the mirror.

Because I could have. I could have stopped it at *any point*, and I damn well know it. Oh, I could use the excuse that it was the only way to save my dad, and now my brother and Val too.

But deep down, I know there were other options.

Roman and I might not see eye to eye regarding Dad, but he's still my big brother, and a *wildly* overprotective one at that.

He also happens to run one of the biggest bratva families in the country.

So yeah, there were other ways out of my predicament that didn't involve going to Blackbriar Hall tonight. Ways that didn't involve letting Vaughn inflict all that humiliation and savagery on me. I could have come clean to Roman. I could have told him about my meeting with Vaughn, and Andrés,

and about Diego’s threats. It might have caused utter chaos and maybe even started a war, but it would have meant not going tonight.

I knew that.

I still went.

Still looked the monster in the eye.

Still spread my legs for him and let him take me any way he wanted.

And the worst part isn’t even that I let that all happen.

It’s that *I liked it*.

Maybe there’s still part of me that’s angry about how I lost my virginity tonight, and what he did to me. But it’s like claiming not to like horror movies, even as you snuggle into the couch with wide, eager eyes, watching the opening credits roll with a fistful of popcorn.

The part of me that wants to be angry is rational, day-to-day survival Evie. Don’t walk into traffic. Don’t run with scissors.

Don’t lose your virginity to a masked psychopath in a graveyard.

But a different part of me is in the driver’s seat right now. The part that thrills at the scary movie, or shrieks on the rollercoaster.

It’s the part of me that dances, and craves the rush that only a defiance of physical limitations and gravity can bring.

Finally I force myself to open my eyes and look at my reflection again.

I still look exhausted beyond belief. Still look like I might fall over at any moment. Still look like an *assault victim*, with bruises and scrapes and blood and cum all over my naked body.

I also look like I just got *ravaged.*

No, not ravaged. Not “bedded”, either, or “swept off my feet”, or any other stupid, G-rated, princess-coded euphemism.

Heat creeps into my cheeks.

I look like I just got *fucked*.

Like a cheap whore.

Like a little cock slut.

And I look like *I loved every second of it*.

I swallow heavily as the heat in my face spreads down my neck, teases over my battered, bruised skin and creeps over my breasts. My sore nipples tighten to aching points, and a fluttering sensation ripples through my belly before heat pools slickly between my thighs.

You just got fucked.

Such a slut.

A little whimper tumbles from my throat, and before I know it, I slide my hand to my breast. I cup it, feeling the sore nipple stiffen against my palm before I twist my hand and pinch the throbbing bud between my thumb and finger.

Pain and pleasure zap like an electric current through my core. I do it again, and a broken, gasped cry escapes my lips.

It's the first few pebbles of an avalanche. Once they start to tumble, the whole mountain comes crashing down.

With a moan, I let my hand drift between my thighs. My fingers push between my sore, swollen lips, ignoring or maybe actually welcoming the sharp sting that accompanies the rush of endorphins. My body trembles as I push a finger inside, and I fog the glass of the mirror with my breath when I drop my forehead to it.

My inner walls feel tight around the single finger. Then I remember how *big* Vaughn is, how much he stretched me and filled me, and the sheer pressure I could feel from his massive size, and a fresh wave of arousal coats my hand.

I drag my slick finger to my swollen clit, still tender and sore. I roll it under the pad of my finger, my eyes half closing as I replay the madness of the night.

My moaning, whimpering voice cracks as I roll my clit and bring my other hand up to pinch and pull mercilessly at my aching nipples. The finger on my clit rubs faster and harder, and when my hand smacks my own breast, my sharp mewl fogs the mirror again.

I do it over and over, desperately thirsty and starving for the rush I felt when he inflicted that pain on me. I tug and pinch viciously at my nipples until my legs are shaking and my thighs are slick with my arousal.

Little slut.

Dirty cum whore.

Oh, *shit*.

I rub harder and faster, feeling myself careening closer to the edge as I seek out every bruise on my body and press into it, drowning in the rush of pain and pleasure and humiliation until I can barely stand.

That's when I wrap my hand around my throat.

I squeeze as hard as I dare, choking and shaking and gasping broken, shattered moans as my jaw goes slack and the cyclone tears through me, leaving a path of destruction in its wake.

I bite down hard on my lip to stop from screaming when the orgasm smashes its way through my broken, bruised body as I sag against the mirror. The taste of copper explodes across my tongue and I let the droplets of blood from my bitten lip dribble down my chin to my chest, then trickle down my stomach as my core clenches and shatters before breaking apart at the seams.

When it's over, I can barely stand. I stumble back to my bed, staring in a daze at my reflection in the smeared and smudged mirror.

Now, standing in the pink room surrounded by crowns and gauze and sparkles, I don't see the good girl anymore.

I see someone raw and wild.

Someone that scares the hell out of me.

And it feels *great*.

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13

DEMON

We need to stop making a habit of this.

You're the one who came here.

Well it was your suggestion.

And you're the one with the legs,motherfucker .

We twist our head, looking towards the mirror to the far side of the bedroom and glaring at our reflection, as if to shut us up.

But the other inside of us pulls at our lips, forcing a wild, savage grin to our face.

Where you go, we go.

With a grunt, we pull our gaze away from our reflection in the pink-framed mirror. We didn't come here to argue with ourselves. Nor did we come here to look at *us*.

We came for *her*.

And right now, we're glad we did.

Evelina looks, frankly, like she got fucked and put away wet. She's sprawled on the edge of her pink and white four-poster bed, the gauzy curtains open, her feet flat on the ground and the rest of her slumped back across the duvet, as if she sat down for a moment and then blacked out.

She’s also delightfully naked.

Our cock twitches, instantly swelling to iron, tenting the front of our jeans. Our eyes slide over her, drinking in the gorgeous view of her pert, small tits, marred and branded with our bruises, bites, scratches, and…

Our brow furrows as we lean over, wet our finger, and swipe it through the drying white stuff streaked across her right breast. Evelina whimpers quietly in her sleep, shifting a little as her nipples tighten to two points. We bring our finger back to our lips and lick it tentatively.

Hmm. We were right.

It’s our cum.

We growl quietly, tracing our gaze over the rest of her battered, delectably marred body. Our eyes settle between her slightly spread thighs, staring at her swollen, pink, freshly *fucked* pussy.

That’s OUR fucking pussy now. Finders fucking keepers.

We linger on her sweet little cunt for another few delicious seconds, reaching down to stroke our cock through our jeans. Then our gaze slips over the rest of her: the cum still streaked across her torso. The leaves in her hair. The remnants of slickness still on her fingers…

We grin hungrily.

It appears our little princess came home, *touched herself* like a bad girl, and then passed out before she could shower.

How good of her.

Our mouth salivates as we drop to our knees, then lean close and push hers apart.

Fuck.

Such a pretty little cunt. It looks even prettier all swollen and red from being deflowered and fucked into oblivion by our big cock earlier.

Next time, we’ll have to come inside her.

Agreed.

We'll come in all her holes and claim every fucking part of her.

No argument here.

We push her thighs a little further apart, leaning close and groaning hungrily as we inhale the sweet, delectable scent.

It's like honey and sin. A drug we fucking *ache* for.

Evelina stirs slightly but doesn't wake when we swipe our tongue over her pussy. We do it again, pushing our tongue between her swollen lips and dragging it up between them. We push it in deep, growling quietly, our hard dick leaking into our boxers as we tongue-fuck her.

Her soft, sleepy moans fill the room. Her hips start to move slightly, rocking against our mouth as we force our tongue deep inside her pussy. We reach down, yanking our belt open and tugging down the zipper. A relieved groan tumbles from our mouth, muffled by her inner thigh, as we free our swollen cock and start to stroke it. Our tongue slides up her lips, dancing and swirling over her hard clit before we wrap our lips around it.

Our tongue swirls and dances, sucking and licking and nibbling as we stroke our thick cock harder and faster. She's moaning and whimpering, still asleep, but her hips still rising and rolling so eagerly against our mouth.

Even in sleep, she's such a good little fuck toy.

We tongue her clit faster, harder, adding more suction, letting the tip dance over her aching bud. Suddenly, a broken, whimpered cry falls from her lips. Her body tenses up, and we groan eagerly as her sweet cum floods our mouth.

In a haze, we stand between her spread thighs and pull her tight little ass right to the edge of the bed.

She was so tight earlier—so tight that we swore her cunt would break our dick off when we were trying to get inside her pretty fuck hole. She's *still* tight, of course, but either from being fucked earlier, or else from our tongue just now, it's a little easier to fit our swollen head inside her.

We won’t fuck her as hard as we want to, because that would wake her, and we’re not sure she’s ready to meet *us*.

But that’s okay.

Somehow, we restrain ourselves to shallow thrusts, pushing our bulging head in and out of her slick, velvety cumhole. Our thumb rolls over her clit, moving faster as her hips roll and her sleeping face caves with pleasure.

“*Yessss*…” she whimpers. “*Moooore*.”

It literally takes every ounce of our control to not ram ourselves balls-deep inside her when she says that.

Dreaming of us, are we, princess?

We rub our thumb harder over her clit, adding pressure as we force a bit more of our dick into her hot, tight cunt. Suddenly, her whimpers echo through the room as her body shudders.

Feeling her come around the head of our cock is more than we can take. With a low groan, we slide out of her and erupt, sending sticky white cum splattering on her pussy, her thighs, and all over her stomach. We stroke harder, grunting as another hot rope lands across her tits and up her neck.

The room goes back to being utterly silent as we stand there, slowly stroking our still-hard cock and grinning at the mess we’ve made of her.

We reach over, scooping up some of our cum with our fingers and bringing it to her mouth. We smear it across her lips, and our cock twitches and leaks more cum onto the floor when her tongue lazily slides out to lick it off.

Evelina whimpers softly in her sleep, twisting slightly with a smile on her face. Her legs close again, and we groan when she squeezes her thighs together.

“*So goooooood*,” she mumbles. “*You feel so good…more…*”

We groan as we wrap our hand around our pulsing, thickening cock.

“*Mooooore…*”

Someone’s about to get fucked awake.

We start to move toward her.

“*Ethan.*”

Her brow furrows.

“*Ethannn…*”

We go stock still.

A black cloud rolls across our mind. Our eyes laser in on her, our mouth a thin line of cold fury as we tuck our cock back into our jeans and zip up.

We need to find this fucking Ethan so we can rip his spine out through his mouth and make his corpse dance like a fucking marionette.

Agreed.

We take one long last look at her.

Then we’re gone.

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14

EVELINA

IT'S OFFICIAL: digitally at least, Vaughn Bancroft doesn’t exist.

I get zero hits from Google. Then I try Bing, Duck Duck Go, Yandex, and a few other search engines I’ve never heard of.

Still nothing.

No socials. No pictures. No news articles that mention his name or even the Obsidian Syndicate itself, which is equal parts strange and terrifying.

Having zero presence online doesn’t mean you don’t post on Facebook very much or go on TikTok that often.

It means you’ve got the power and the means to *make* yourself invisible.

Sitting cross-legged on my bed, I roll my neck before leaning forward again to peer at the laptop screen in front of me. *Val*, of course, has a huge online presence. There’s plenty of news about the Zakharova, including an incredible piece *New York Magazine* did a few months ago on masculinity and the arts featuring a killer interview with him. He’s *all over* social media, too, though he’s cleaned it up a bit since becoming an item with my brother. I remember a time when his Instagram page was *full* of party pics with Val looking his usual smugly charming self, his arms around all manner of male and female “friends”.

Aka, fuck buddies.

But in a post-Roman world? That’s all gone. Now, his social media is an endless, nauseating barrage of cutesy photos of the two of them.

Val and Roman holding hands walking through Central Park. Val and Roman kissing courtside at a Knicks game. Val looking *incredibly* excited and proud as he mugs for the camera, while Roman rolls his eyes and holds up his six-month sobriety coin.

But his older brother?

Nothing. Not a single photo, post, reference, or “like”.

I scowl at the laptop screen before suddenly, I pause.

Did *I* just say “fuck buddy”?

Heat creeps up my neck. Okay, I didn't *say* it. But I sure thought it.

Fuck buddy.

I repeat it inside my head like a dirty little secret, letting it simmer there.

It’s not that I don’t swear. It’s just that…

Okay, I don’t swear. But it’s not something I do purposefully, like I’m *trying* to cultivate this ultra prim and proper “good girl” persona. I just don’t really ever use expletives, especially not the F word.

And yet…I just *did* say it…or at least think it.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“Fuck!!!”

I cringe the moment I yell the word out loud to no one in my room. My face throbs with heat as I clamp both hands over my mouth, biting back a grin.

“*Fuck*,” I say again, much more quietly.

Hmm.

Apparently, no-longer-a-virgin Evelina swears.

Interesting.

It’s been five days since *that night*.

The night Vaughn rampaged past every comfort zone, line and boundary I have. Or *had*. And since then, that’s *all* I’ve been thinking about.

Not in a “schoolgirl crush” way. Naive as I am, I’m not *that* innocent. I know sex frequently is *just sex*. I know this doesn't make him my boyfriend.

But still.

Still.

My teeth rake over my lower lip.

It *was* my first time. Five days later, saying that to myself still brings a flutter to my stomach.

I’m not a virgin anymore.

The major bummer is, I can’t tell anyone. I can't confess breathlessly to any of my besties that *I*, Evelina, got *royally fucked* the other night.

A blush heats my face.

I think I could get used to this internal swearing thing.

Because that’s the only word to describe what the other night was. I didn’t “make love”. I didn’t “hook up” or “have sex”.

I got *fucked*.

Hard.

Brutally.

Like a cheap whore.

And it was, without question, the hottest night of my life, leading to the biggest orgasms I’ve ever had.

It’s also resulted in several *other* very intense orgasms over the last few days. It appears that Vaughn’s savage brutality has unlocked something in

me.

It’s not like the old Evelina didn’t ever masturbate. I mean, innocence aside, I’m still *human*. And even though there were times when I wondered if I *was* asexual, I still had urges. And I did, on occasion, “relieve” those urges in private.

Since the other night, though, I’ve “relieved” those urges twelve times.

In five days.

That's more “relief” that I’ve given myself in the last nine *months* before the other night.

And every single one of those fantasies, and every single one of my dreams where I wake up wet and clenching my thighs together, were about *Vaughn.*

Well, except for one *horrifying* sex dream where Vaughn morphed into *Ethan*, my ex, and dream me had to yell at him to go away.

I should really start limiting my caffeine and sugar intake.

My phone chiming on my bed pulls me away from the decidedly pornographic replays of the other night in the graveyard. I glance down and grin when I see who it is.

"Hey, Gabby!"

“HEY! I’ve been *insanely* busy the last few days, but I’ve been dying to ask you how your initiation went!”

Heat floods my face.

“Oh, it was…”

I got fucked to within an inch of my life in the middle of a graveyard. Also, it was my first time.

“It was…fine,” I mumble, my cheeks throbbing.

“Um, don’t answer if you don’t want to, obviously, but, uh, *what happened* to you? I mean you looked…I don’t mean to but shitty, but you just

looked…”

Like I got fucked by an animal?

“Oh, it was nothing,” I say quickly. “My initiation was outside, and I totally tripped over something like an idiot and fell right into this huge muddy puddle,” I blurt. “My Adept was really nice about it, though, and gave me that coat to wear since my clothes were *shot*.”

“*Ugh*, I’m sorry,” she groans. “You were okay, though?”

An excellent question.

“Oh, totally,” I laugh nervously. “Just wet!”

I cringe.

“From the mud.” I clear my throat. “How was yours—” I frown as I suddenly flash back to the beginning of the initiation, *before* my madness with Vaughn.

“Oh my God!” I blurt, remembering the huge man towering over Gabby growling “*change of plans*”. “Right! What happened with—”

“*Nothing*,” she replies quickly, her voice cracking a little.

My brow furrows. “But did you figure out what happened to your friend?”

“Oh, yeah, no…” She pauses. “They said it was a conflict of interest.”

I mean, it does make sense that the Syndicate wouldn’t want an initiate’s friend to be their Adept. I’ve heard of sororities doing the same to avoid anyone “going easy” on a pledge.

My mouth twists as I remember something else she said that night. “Oh, jeez, does that mean you had to—”

“*Snakes*, yeah,” she says quickly, her voice shaking. She forces an awkward laugh. “No luck avoiding that.” She blows out a breath, clearly not wanting to talk about it. “What about you? What was the fear you had to face?”

A monster.

“Monsters,” I blurt.

When she pauses, I scrunch my face up.

“I mean obviously not *actual* monsters,” I add with another nervous laugh. “But like, being afraid of a jump-scare.”

“Yikes,” Gabby mumbles. “In *that* creepy place? Sounds terrifying.”

“It was, yeah.” I swallow, heat rising in my cheeks. “Yeah, it was terrifying.”

Terrifying how much I enjoyed it.

Terrifying how much I’ve been fantasizing about it nonstop ever since.

“So who was the guy you got instead of your friend?”

“Evie…” There’s caution in her tone. “We’re not supposed to talk about who our Adepts are.”

“Oh, right, of course,” I mumble.

She laughs awkwardly. “Although, I guess it'll become pretty obvious at the get-together on Saturday night.”

My brow furrows. “The what?”

“The Syndicate cocktail party,” Gabby continues. “At that penthouse on Central Park West?”

My mouth purses. “I…don’t think I was invited.”

She snorts. “Of course you were! It’s like a *thing* for Adepts and their Acolytes. Did your Adept not tell you about it yet?”

Yet.

“I…I guess not,” I hazard, my brows knitting. “Hey, how often have you and your Adept talked since the initiation, anyway?”

“Just…” Her voice cracks again. “Just a few times. That’s all.”

A few times.

For me, it’s been five days of radio silence.

Gabby’s talked with her Adept “a few times”, and I’ve got *nothing*? Not even an invite to this Syndicate party *specifically* for Adepts and their Acolytes?

“Evie, I’m sure your Adept just forgot to mention it. Remember, these people are all high-ranking members of the Syndicate. Like, they've got shit to do, right?”

“Oh, for sure,” I murmur, frowning. “Hey, what’s the address of that place?”

She rattles off the ritzy address and I quickly type it into my laptop.

“Hey, I know,” she says brightly. “Why don’t we meet up before for a drink or something and go together?”

I frown. “Don't you think I should wait for my Adept to get in contact first?”

“Eh,” she says casually. “Again, these people are *busy*, girl. I say if they reach out, great. If not, just show up. They’ll probably be relieved when they see you because they'll realize they forgot to give you the details.”

My Adept?

Highly debatable. But I also didn’t go through what I went through the other night to quit now, just because Vaughn sucks at texting.

A grin spreads over my face. “Meeting up before sounds *great*.”

* * *

ME

How come I wasn’t invited to the Syndicate party on Saturday?

OKAY, I cracked. It’s been three days since I talked to Gabby, which means *eight* days since the initiation. And I still hadn’t heard a word from Vaughn.

I mean, purely from an administrative standpoint… This isn't just any Adept. He's the freaking *Marquis*. I get that he's probably insanely busy, but surely he could have had an assistant message me about Saturday?

So earlier tonight, after rehearsal, when I saw Val's phone lying open on the side of the stage, I *may* have grabbed his brother's personal cellphone number.

I stare at the "Read" notification next to my text. Which means he's seen it but has chosen not to respond.

ME

Hi

ME

Hellooo? I know you're there.

Those are both "read", too. I sigh, staring at the screen as I lie back in bed. Finally, I see the three dots appear.

VAUGHN

Getting my personal number from Val was a poor judgment call.

I shiver, shaken at how easily he knew that. Then I remind myself that there's logically only so many ways I *could* have gotten his number, especially since he's a ghost online.

ME

I just want to know what I'm supposed to do now.

VAUGHN

What you should do is use that safe word.

ME

??

ME

I mean with the party. I was waiting for my invite, but it's tomorrow, so I'm wondering what I should do.

VAUGHN

I told you. Use your goddamn safe word. You're in over your head, and if you keep this up, I promise you, you'll drown.

An icy shiver creeps up my spine. Then I scowl at the phone as my fingers start to tap.

ME

Well, still haven't used it. Guess you have to bring me as your date to this thing. Too bad! :P

He reads the message.

He doesn't answer.

No three dots. Nothing. I keep staring at the screen, waiting for a reply, feeling more and more pathetic when it doesn't come.

ME

JK, it's not "too bad". I'm quite fun at parties.

Still nothing.

ME

Is this like a test?

Crickets.

ME

Anyhoo, what time on Saturday works? I got the address from a friend, so I can just meet you there. She and I are going to get drinks beforehand.

Radio. Freaking. Silence.

ME

OK…I'll just see you there, then?

Another long minute drags by. Finally, those three dots appear.

VAUGHN

You're done. The Syndicate is not for you. Delete this number.

I stare at the screen, a mix of anger and something else sinking into my gut.

…Something that I refuse to label as anything approaching "feeling rejected by the guy I lost my virginity to a few days ago".

That would be pathetic, even for me.

New Evie actually gets as far as typing “go fuck yourself, motherfucker” as heat blooms across her face.

But then I delete it and toss the phone down onto the bed. My jaw sets.

I am *not* pissed about his answer because of who he is, i.e., the guy who I had sex with for the first time.

I’m *not*.

But I *am* pissed about being sidelined by an organization who went on and on about utter commitment and brotherhood and all that bullshit.

Screw Vaughn.

I smile smugly.

No.

FUCK Vaughn.

Yeah, you already did that, and where did that get you?

I pout, sinking into the pillows at my back.

I *hate* the way my heart jumps in my chest when my phone dings. I also hate how quickly I fumble for it and unlock the screen.

The second I do, my smile fades.

My chest tightens.

It’s not Vaughn.

It’s *Diego*.

I click on the text and immediately gasp sharply, my hand flying to my mouth.

It’s a photo of my father, sitting at a table on a small apartment balcony, sipping coffee and reading a Russian newspaper.

…A photo that’s been taken through the scope of a rifle, the crosshairs centered squarely on Dad’s forehead.

DIEGO TORVALLÉS

Don’t mistake my patience for weakness, Evelina.

DIEGO TORVALLÉS

I want what I asked for. Find my bastard son.

DIEGO TORVALLÉS

Do not keep me waiting.

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VAUGHN

"YO, MARCUS."

I keep glaring at my phone. She started to type a message after I shut this shit down, then ended up not sending it.

Fuck. I'm *far* too invested in—

"*Marcus*."

I scowl as I snap my eyes up. Carson is grinning at me with the glint in his eyes he always gets when he's trying to stir the pot or be the cause of chaos and violence like the fucking unhinged instigator that he is.

Calling me "Marcus" instead of "Marquis" is his juvenile way of trying to get under my skin.

The annoying fucking thing is, it *works*.

Not because I'm upset that he's not calling me "The Marquis", obviously. It's a pretty outdated moniker, and I only care about it being used in formal Syndicate settings or ceremonies. I mean, tradition is important, and has it's place.

No, it works because it tells me he's actively *trying* to be a dickhead. For some reason, that annoys the fuck out of me.

"Have you ever considered growing up past the age of eleven?"

Carson taps his chin thoughtfully.

“Depends. Do eleven-year-olds get boners? Like, could I still fuck?”

I stare at him. “Yes, officers, this conversation right here,” I say deadpan.

My friend grins at me. “I was just trying to get under your skin.”

“Yeah, I got that,” I mutter. “Do you want notes?”

“Always.”

I glare at him. “It worked.”

“Oh, good,” he beams. “Still got it. “So it really *is* that you’ve just been a mopey fuck since the initiation, not that my high level of humor has slipped.”

I shoot him a look. “I haven’t been mopey. I’ve been *busy*.”

“But not with your own Acolyte.”

I arch a brow. Carson smirks.

“*Come on*,” he drawls, latching onto it like a cat with its claws on a mouse. “You thought I wouldn’t notice? Yours passed. She was standing there at the end—not in the clothes she came in, I should add. We’re *really* just glossing over the part where she looked naked, wrapped in your coat? Hmm?”

“My initiate,” I growl, “is no longer under consideration for the Syndicate.”

She can’t be. Even though she broke so fucking sweetly, and I’ve spent every waking second since that night thinking about her snug cunt and shattered tears…

No.

Carson’s face twists into the world’s most insincere "sad" expression.

“*Aww*, did she not like the way you play, Marcus?”

I remind myself daily how lucky it is that Carson and I are such old friends.

Lucky for *him*, that is.

“Were you too rough with your new toy?” He winces dramatically. “Did you *break* her?”

I don’t give him any more fuel: he feeds off this shit.

And not that he brought it up or even has any clue about it, but my decision to cut Evelina loose has fuck-all to do with the fact that she whimpered *some other motherfuckers name* after I made her come in her sleep.

It *doesn’t*, and I will die on that hill.

But we’re still going to wear your fucking skin, Ethan….

When it’s clear I’m not going to answer, Carson pouts, scowling and turning away.

“Speaking of initiates,” I say mildly, “you weren’t even supposed to *have* one the other night. And yet…”

He glances at me, his eyes glinting dangerously.

“Careful, Bancroft.”

“I’m not asking as a teasing friend, but as your Marquis,” I murmur.

His jaw tightens.

“In that case, *Marcus*,” he drawls, effortlessly sliding back into his role as charmingly infuriating smug rich boy. “All I will say is there was a security concern, and so plans were changed.”

I eye him. “And your initiate…”

“Walked out with her clothes on,” he growls, the smile gone from his face. He brings a hand up and rakes his fingers through his hair, his sleeve sliding up to reveal a glimpse of the snake tattoo that coils from his wrist all the way to his chest. “More than one can say about yours, wouldn’t you agree?”

Before I can respond, the wall behind me slides open with the distinctive sound of stone scraping against stone. On this side, the wall just looks like part of one of the hallways that meander through Blackbriar Hall, complete with an oil portrait of the former governor of some forgotten township in pre-colonial America, and a random suit of armor standing by.

The other side of the door, however, like so many of the secret passages and rooms in this house, is something else.

Gideon steps out of the shadows of the passageway that leads to the torture chamber, and into the hallway where Carson and I are talking. His brow furrows.

“What’s the holdup? They’re both about to crack down there.” He lifts a shoulder. “Or, if you want me to keep pushing, that can easily be arranged—”

“No, I’m coming,” I growl. “We were just…discussing something.”

Carson grins. “Yeah. I was giving him a hard time about his initiate coming back to the main hall *missing her clothes*.”

Gideon’s brow cocks almost imperceptibly as he looks between me and Carson, shrugging.

“So? Initiations can get rough. Conway’s initiate came back without his shirt.”

Thank you, Gideon. Unlike Carson, he doesn’t sustain himself on being a needling little prick all the time.

Carson sighs. “Yes, because *Conway’s* initiate wasn’t fond of fire, and his ordeal ended with his shirt going up in flames. So I hear.” He grins savagely and turns to me. “Is that what happened with yours, Bancroft? Did all her clothes just…*burn off* ?”

Gideon glares at Carson. “Do you have *any* concept of chain of command?”

Carson sighs, rolling his eyes and looping an arm over my shoulder. “Yes, but I also have a spine, and don't enjoy kissing asses when that ass happens to belong to one of my oldest friends. But go ahead, Wick. Those boots aren’t going to lick themselves. Oh, and while you’re down there—hey *back off, asshat!*” He lurches away, ducking behind me as Gideon lunges at him with balled fists. “Marcus! Help me!”

I sigh and shake him off. “Can you *behave*?”

“I anticipate historians pondering that very question in a hundred years, at the base of my statue, obviously.”

I roll my eyes and turn to Gideon. “All right, let’s go see our guests.”

“Fine,” he mutters, glaring at Carson. “But Bozo the fucking clown stays here.”

“No fair,” Carson sighs, gesturing to the open secret passage. “All the blood and guts and torture and fun shit is in *there*!”

“Torturing people in order to get information rather than just to inflict pain is an *art*, not a game,” Gideon says quietly.

“Uh, okay, cool, Patrick Bateman,” Carson mutters. “Remind me not to ask you your thoughts on the latest Phil Collins record, you fucking psycho.”

Gideo sighs heavily and glances at me. “He’s just going to fuck up all the work we’ve done to get to this point.”

“I won’t say a *word*,” Carson pleads. “Scout's honor. I just want to watch.”

“And *I’m* the psycho…” Gideon mutters.

“Wick,” I sigh, putting a hand heavily on his shoulder. “I really don’t think it’s an either/or situation.”

He smirks. “Fine. But Looney Tunes here shuts the fuck *up*.”

Carson makes a big show of zipping his mouth shut and throwing away the key before we all head down the secret passage. At the end, the hallway turns a sharp ninety degrees. Then it goes down two small flights of stairs, broken up with a landing with a locked door that leads to…well, I honestly don’t even know.

I bought this house when I took over from my predecessor, Étienne Veyrac. It’s a little…*isolated*, being a four-hour drive or an hour by helicopter from midtown Manhattan, tucked up here in the Adirondack mountains of upstate New York. I still have a place in the city, of course, but I also like it up here, and I fell in love with the place the second I laid eyes on it.

I like how it's removed from everything. I also like that it’s riddled with secret passages, hidden doorways, and rooms. There's whole sections of the house that don’t exist on the official blueprints.

The “torture chamber”, obviously, wasn’t originally built by the Carnegie family as an *actual torture chamber*. It was a kitchen of some kind with rooms attached to it, almost a whole apartment hidden under the east wing. I discovered the spot in the first few weeks of living here. But there are plenty of other secrets in this house I haven’t had time to explore yet, like the door we just passed.

Neither of the older men tied to chairs in the middle of the former kitchen is whimpering or begging when I walk in. They just regard me unemotionally, even though they’ve spent the last twelve hours down here getting beaten and tortured, and probably pissing their pants.

“Mr. Stone. Mr. Beaumont. I’m so glad you could finally make the trip to visit me in my new home.”

The two men still don’t say a word, and keep their heads held high.

I respect that. I'd respect it even more if these two weren’t part of an old-guard faction within the Syndicate that’s plotting a coup against me.

“I hope you’ve been enjoying your stay.” I smile thinly, eying them both.

Jameson Beaumont, arrogant loudmouth that he is, finally speaks.

“Now listen here, Vaughn—”

He grunts, his head whipping sideways when Sebastian, who’s been leaning against the wall, walks over and backhands him across the mouth. Blood sprays from his split lip, and he curses.

“Let’s try this again,” I murmur. “How has your stay been so far?”

“Mr. Bancroft,” Gordon Stone says, looking tired, his voice rough, but his shoulders still straight. “If I may speak?”

“Be my guest.”

He dips his chin. “I know there are Veyrac loyalists still in our ranks trying to undermine your efforts to lead our organization. But with all due respect—”

“Due respect,” Carson mutters, “would mean *not* plotting against dear Marcus here. By which, of course, I mean *the Marquis*.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

I glare at Carson, who grins sheepishly and shrugs his shoulders. Then I turn back to Gordon. “Keep going.”

“There’s a coup brewing against you, make no mistake,” he growls. “But I swear on my life that I have nothing to do with it.” His brow knits. “If I may?”

I nod. “Go right ahead.”

He clears his throat. “I’m sure you’re aware that I was part of the voting council that removed your grandfather from the Synd—”

“I never knew my grandfather,” I growl quietly. “He died before I was born. And none of this is rooted in vengeance, I can promise you.”

He nods slowly.

“Well,” I jerk my chin at the other man. “What about your little friend here.”

Gordon’s eyes narrow. “Beaumont isn’t any friend of mine. That’s no secret.”

I smile calmly. “Regardless, is he involved?”

Jameson’s head snaps around and he glares death at Gordon. “You throw me under the bus, and I’ll fucking—”

“I don’t know,” Gordon says evenly, shaking his head. “I really don’t. All I can say is, *I’m* not involved. I swear that on my life and on the Syndicate.”

I sigh. I wish I could believe him, because he really does sound believable. The problem is, I know he’s lying, because I have proof of his involvement in the coup. Not a smoking-gun proof, where I’ll be killing the two of them

tonight. But proof enough to strip them both of their territories and council privileges within the Syndicate.

And *I* have proof because *Quentin* has proof.

“Well?” Gideon murmurs quietly, turning his back on the two men to speak quietly with me. “They’re both Syndicate lifers. Neither of them is going to spill anything about anyone they may have been working with. You might as well cut their throats now.”

I’d love to take his advice. But I can’t kill two senior members without a smoking gun and *not* expect it to turn into a massive problem.

“Well?” Jameson spits venomously. “You gonna kill us, young kinglet?”

“I have a better idea.” I eye them both coldly. “You’re both hereby stripped of your territories, leadership positions and council privileges, until further notice.”

Jameson balks, his face going ashen. Gordon just grits his teeth.

I glance to Sebastian. “Cut them loose.” I turn back to them. “You’re both welcome to stay the night. There are guest quarters for you, and I’ll provide a doctor and fresh clothes, if you wish.”

“*Fuck you*,” Jameson snaps, rubbing his wrists as Seb cuts him free.

Gordon just bows his head. “I thank you for your justness and mercy, Marquis,” he says quietly and without malice. “I would be an honor to stay under your roof tonight.”

I smile sadly.

Gordon is a good man. I wish he wasn’t involved in this shit. But unfortunately, proof doesn’t lie.

* * *

“CAN I assume you’ve been playing Dungeon with the other boys?”

I smile as I step through the hidden passageway in the bookshelf of my study and see the brunette with the pretty blue eyes.

“You’re early.”

Sabine shrugs, grinning at me as she wheels over. I meet her halfway, dropping down on my haunches to give her a hug.

“Pfft. I was bored with Paris.”

I snort. “Really.”

“*Vraiment*.” She winks. “Trust me,” she purrs in her mild Parisian accent, “a little Paris goes a long way.”

I chuckle as I walk over to the bar cart near the windows. “Are you drinking?”

“*Oui*. Whiskey, *merci*.”

I pour us each a splash and walk back to her wheelchair, handing her a glass and then clinking mine against it. “So…what do you think?” I arch my brows and then raise my eyes to the room around us.

She whistles as she looks up at the gilded ceiling. “*Mon Dieu*, this *house*! Fuck!” She laughs and shakes her head, running her manicured nails through her dark chestnut hair. “I mean, I’d seen pictures, but… This is a castle, Vaughn.”

I chuckle. “Well, they do say a man’s home is his castle.”

“And you, as always, take things so literally.” She shakes her head and takes a sip of her drink. “Seriously, the house is *gorgeous*. And *merci* for the elevator,” she adds, looking away as she takes another sip.

“I considered ordering Seb and Carson to be your designated mode of transportation whenever you needed to go up and down any stairs.”

She laughs. “I’m sure they’d have loved that. But the elevator is probably easier.”

I grin, lifting my glass. “Fuck, it’s going to be great having you here.”

I go *way* back with Sabine Lourde, almost as far as Seb, Carson, and Gideon. When I was a kid, her father, Stellan, became a mentor to me. He was in the upper echelons of the Syndicate, and I guess he saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself yet.

He nurtured it. He showed me the ropes and a path up through the ranks so that I didn't spend my whole life as a low-level thug or street enforcer. He became like a father to me—more than my actual dad ever was.

And then, two years ago, a bombing orchestrated by Diego Torvallés killed that father figure and put Sabine in a wheelchair a month after her twenty-first birthday.

Since then, I’ve taken her under my wing, almost like the little sister I never had. She doesn't *need* my protection: paraplegic or not, she’s one of the toughest motherfuckers I’ve ever met. But still.

Stellan made me his family.

So now I’ve made his daughter mine.

Sabine’s spent a lot of the last four months working under Gaspard Leclerc, the senior Syndicate officer who essentially runs France for me. She’s been back and forth a lot: sometimes in New York with me, sometimes back in Paris. Recently, she admitted that she’d rather be in the States fulltime with me and my crew of psychopathic misfits.

She’s in the middle of getting her own place in the city. But for now, she’ll be staying here at Blackbriar Hall.

My brows knit. “Look, it's not that I don’t want you here…”

“Uh oh,” she gulps dramatically.

I roll my eyes. “The city might be…you know…a bit more manageable in terms of getting around. You might feel cooped up here in the house all the time.”

She shrugs. “Yes, but if I move to the city, I’ll miss out on all the hiking trails and rock climbing I keep hearing the Adirondacks are so famous for.”

I sigh. She grins impishly at me.

“Gallows humor, Vaughn.” She snickers. “Or more like gal-*rolls* humor.”

I groan as she snorts at her own terrible joke.

We chat a bit longer before jet lag catches up with her and she heads off to check out the elevator I had installed a month ago and go to her bedroom.

I pour myself another drink and head up to the observatory: a huge, glass-enclosed room set on one of the gothic rooflines of the mansion, with panoramic views of the mountains and the woods stretching out in almost every direction.

It doesn’t take long for Quentin to show up.

“This house is getting crowded.”

I nod, my gaze still piercing through the window, drinking in the last shards of sunlight as the sun dips behind a peak.

“You’re sure she won’t be a distraction?” he says quietly.

“She’s family,” I growl through my teeth. “She’s not going anywhere, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I wasn’t implying anything of the kind, Vaughn.”

I turn, taking a slow sip of my drink.

“The proof you found was…helpful,” I murmur.

“The proof that *we* found,” he smirks, nodding sagely as he leans against the bookshelves near the door. Although you have…doubts.”

I frown. “Jameson Beaumont is obviously part of it. The arrogant prick spent his life with his tongue up Veyrac’s asshole.” I shake my head. “But Gordon…”

“Everyone has a side they don’t let the rest of the world see, Vaughn.” He tilts his head. “You of all people should know that.”

“It just doesn’t add up. He has more to lose going against me than to gain.”

“You’ve seen the proof, though.”

I nod unhappily. Quentin sighs.

“A king’s job is never easy, Vaughn. The sword of Damocles is always hanging by that goddamn thread over your head.” He leans on his cane, looking over his glasses at me, then his brow furrows as he delicately clears his throat.

“Will *she* be a problem?”

“I told you, Sabine is fam—”

“I’m not talking about Sabine.”

My eyes snap to his. Rabid anger snarls inside me.

“No,” I growl. “She won't. Because she won’t be involved with the Syndicate going forward.”

Quentin nods slowly. “Good. You mustn’t be distracted right now, Vaughn.”

“I’m not.”

“Every man can be distracted by a pretty face.”

“I said I’m *not*,” I snap.

Quentin just arches his brows.

“There is one other thing.”

I rub my temples tiredly. “What.”

“Carson was…*casual* with you, earlier.”

I frown as I glance up at him. “Of course he was. He’s one of my best friends.”

“Yes, but there’s a time and a place. Arthur was good friends with a few of his knights. But the round table came first. Remember that.” He peers at me over the rim of his glasses again. “There may come a time sooner than you know when Carson King becomes less a friend and more of a liability—”

“This conversation is over.”

The words snap coldly from my lips. The observatory goes silent as I turn away, looking back out through the glass at the now darkened mountains.

“I’m merely here to help, Vaughn.”

“I know.”

“To see a legacy fulfilled.”

I nod, still looking out the windows as silence bathes the room. Eventually I turn to him, but of course he’s gone now.

“Thanks, Grandfather,” I murmur to the now-empty room. I lift my drink and swallow the last of the whiskey, then exhale as I leave the observatory.

Yes, it would have been nice to have Quentin Bancroft here to see all this unfold. But that’s a pipe dream.

He’s been dead for thirty years.

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16

VAUGHN

CONTRARY TO THE RUMORS, not every Syndicate party is a demented orgy held somewhere like Club Venom.

That's more Carson and Sebastian's thing than mine or Gideon's.

When I fuck, I don't want, nor *need*, a goddamn audience to bear witness to my unhinged brand of sexual gratification.

I mean, the NDAs alone would be a fucking nightmare.

Besides, over the last two weeks, the part of me that craves that particular brand of sex is…

Well.

"Absent" would be incorrect. Distracted isn't right, either.

Focused.

That's the word. My virulent appetite for depraved sex mixed with violence, power, and sadism isn't muzzled in *any* fucking capacity.

It's laser focused. On one. Fucking. Person.

A person I've chosen to excise from my world.

So, no, tonight's gathering at Sebastian's massive three-story penthouse overlooking Central Park West is *not* the same type of affair that Evelina managed to sneak into the other day.

“There’s way too many clothes at this party.”

…*Much* to Carson’s chagrin, I might add.

Sebastian rolls his eyes. “Yeah, keep your clothes *on* in my house, fucker.”

Carson sighs dramatically. “So fucking puritanical. And such a disappointment for your guests.”

Seb shakes his head and runs a hand over his jaw.

“No one wants to see you naked, King.”

Carson snorts. “*Demonstrably* false. But, if you’re just worried about your prospects seeing *my* dick and deciding you’re maybe not the horse they should be betting on, well…”

Sebastian sighs and shoots me a look. “Can't we just leave him outside?”

I shake my head. “Pretty sure that constitutes child abuse.”

Sebastian chuckles as Carson flips us both off.

“These are people we might be bringing into our world for life,” I say pointedly. “*Not* potential hookups. Nobody's taking out their dick.”

“Says the guy whose Acolyte came limping back inside without any clothes and ‘just got fucked’ hair,” Carson mutters.

“Would *you* care to explain why exactly you scooped Maeve’s Acolyte out from under her?” I growl at him. “Or why you were looking at said Acolyte like you wanted to choke the life from her? *Or* why that Acolyte looked like she’d looked death in the face after she made it back from—”

“Okay,” Carson hisses. “You’ve made your point. Drop it.”

“That…doesn’t sound much like an explanation, does it?” Seb grins.

“I said *drop it*,” Carson snarls with an edge I’m not really expecting. Before I have time to consider that further, Sebastian clears his throat.

“Guess we can ask her directly,” he grunts, nodding his chin. “She just arrived.” He frowns. “And lookie here, she brought a friend…”

Mother.

Fucker.

My jaw tightens, and the vicious beast inside me bares its teeth through the bars of its cage when I see Gabriella De Luca walk into Seb's penthouse.

…With *Evelina*.

Evelina, who shouldn't fucking be here, especially not dressed like *that*.

My jaw tightens as my gaze stabs across the penthouse. The beast inside me snarls louder. My hands twitch at my side.

She's still in head to toe pink as she steps into the penthouse, of course. But instead of her usual "harmonizes with woodland creatures" and "looking for my dickless, G-rated Prince Charming" vibe, there's something more… *adult* going on.

More alluring.

And it makes my dick swell in my pants as I devour the sight of her.

Of course.

It's not just the color of the dress.

It's how *little of her it covers*.

The Evelina that just walked in wearing towering stilettos and a strapless cocktail dress with a *dangerous* hemline is anything but G-rated.

She still looks like a princess, but this princess is one you'd want to rail the fuck out of, not watch sing and dance with Bambi or the seven goddamn dwarves.

I grit my teeth, even as hunger gnaws at me.

She was not invited.

She shouldn't be here.

She's *out* of consideration for the Syndicate, and therefore lucky to be alive.

So what in God’s name possessed her to show up?

I’m only vaguely aware of Sebastian and Carson bickering like children. I’m even less aware of Gabriella De Luca, in an equally revealing green dress.

Because Evelina has my full attention.

And someone should *truly* impress upon her how dangerous that is.

Just then she turns, scanning the party.

She spots me, and our eyes lock.

For half a second, I see the world through Demon’s eyes. I remember her naked body, splayed across her bed, covered in bruises and bites, dotted and streaked with blood and cum.

Red mist clouds my vision as my eyes stab right into her.

But then she fucking *smiles* at me and even gives me a little fluttered finger wave as her cheeks turn as pink as her dress.

Fuck.

And that’s when I realize what she’s fucking doing here, and it’s *so much worse* than not getting the hint and still trying to get herself into the Syndicate.

It’s *me*.

There’s a reason I don’t sleep with virgins, and that reason just walked in wearing big girl heels and a bad girl dress, trying to get my attention like the clingy, naive little princess she is.

Time to shut this down.

I turn to excuse myself from my friends. But there’s no need. Sebastian is already off talking to a few other senior members. Carson is nowhere to be found, and for that matter neither is Gabriella.

Yeah, those are pressing questions.

But they're going to have to wait.

"What the *fuck* are you doing here?"

She's in the middle of plucking a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter. Evelina whirls, gasping at the ferocity of my tone, her eyes widening as she looks up at me towering over her.

"I—" She pauses, then flashes that sweet, innocent smile up at me. "It's a party for Acolytes and their Adepts—"

"You're not an Acolyte."

Goosebumps break out over her bare arms as she wraps one across her middle. Her delicate throat works as she swallows.

"*Yes I am*," she says quietly.

My gaze bores into her. "*No*, you're *not*. I ended it."

Now run the fuck away before I devour you, little girl.

But the fool stands her ground, looking me right in the eye.

"You told me before—and you were very clear here—that the only way to end this would be for me to use my safe word," Evelina says quietly. "I haven't done that."

"Bravery is to be admired, Evelina," I growl. "Stupidity, not so much." She shivers under my frozen glare. "I'm giving you an out," I hiss quietly. "Take it."

She blinks quickly, her throat bobbing again. "The other night—"

"Was *nothing*," I snap. "That was a free swim in the kiddie pool. You have no fucking *idea* how deep the real one gets," I snarl.

I fully invade her personal space, stepping so close that she's forced to retreat until finally her back hits the wall. Her big gray eyes widen as they look into mine.

The champagne ripples in the flute caught between her fingers.

Then, she opens *that mouth*.

"*I'm still here,*" she whispers.

"*Why,*" I growl.

Evelina trembles and shrinks into the wall when I move even closer.

"Why do you want into the Syndicate so fucking badly," I hiss quietly. "You're a princess. You're not a second-born with aims of leading that will never be realized. Your little friend that you came here tonight with? Gabriella? *She* wants power that she'll never get living in her big brother Nero's shadow." I shake my head. "But that's not you."

She glares at me. "I—I want to be in the Syndicate, because you told me the Syndicate helps its own—"

"Try again."

She *cannot* be that foolish to want to commit herself *for life* to this organization just to help her dog-shit father out a mess of his own making. A man who doesn't give a *fuck* about her, or anyone other than himself and his own ambitions.

No. That's not why she's here. Maybe at first, but not now.

"Do you want to know what I think?" I purr, my eyes glinting down at her. "I think you got a taste of something you've only ever fantasized about, and you've realized how much you like it." I move so close that my body presses into hers.

Evelina's eyes widen. "I—"

"Are you here for my *cock*, Evelina?"

Her face explodes with heat. "*No!*" she blurts indignantly, her whole body turning red. "I want nothing to *do* with your…your—!"

"*Cock*," I murmur. "*Say it*."

Her mouth pulls to a line, and her head shakes subtly side to side.

"*Say. It*."

“*No*,” she whispers.

We’re tucked away in the shadows of an alcove. Her breath catches sharply when my hand gently curls around her throat, and the second my fingers press against her pulse point, the rest of the party dis-a-fucking-pears.

The world narrows to a black tunnel until all that exists is her big, scared, doe eyes, looking up into mine like the most delicious fucking prey in the world.

“I won’t ask again.”

Her throat bobs against my hand. Her eyes lock with mine as she bristles, that mouth of hers getting all pissy-looking in way that is entirely too appetizing.

We should pry it open with our dick until she’s drooling all over it.

“Cock.”

She hurls it like a slur. It doesn’t matter.

I’m still hard. *Instantly*.

But still, this needs to stop.

“Coming to this party after I told you we were done was supremely stupid.”

Her mouth trembles. “*I haven’t used the word*,” she croaks.

“Then maybe I haven’t been *hard enough* on you.”

Time to shut this down for real.

“There’s a reason I don’t fuck virgins, Evelina,” I sigh.

Her jaw drops open.

“You…” She blinks. “You think I’m here because I’m *obsessed* with you or something?!”

“Or something.”

Her gray eyes glint up at me.

“You think any girl in their right mind wants more of that…that *horror show* you put me through?!”

I smirk. “Please. Your cunt came apart at the seams for my *horror show*—”

At first, I don’t really comprehend why there's liquid in my eyes, dribbling down my face.

But then, the distinctive taste of champagne teases over my lips.

I blink, clearing my vision. Evelina is staring at me, horror etched over her face.

“I—”

“Coming here was mistake enough,” I growl quietly. “But that?”

She gasps, stiffening as my hand shoots out to wrap like iron around her throat.

“*That* was supremely. Fucking. Stupid.”

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17

EVELINA

EVERY THOUGHT in my head is screaming for me to turn and *run*.

The exit is right there.

I'm not physically restrained or held captive. He's even dropped his iron-like grip on my wrist .

And yet, I still follow Vaughn wordlessly through the party, as if there's an invisible collar around my neck that has me stumbling after him to keep up.

In a last-ditch attempt to extricate myself from this hold he seems to have over me, I furtively glance around, searching for Gabby, hoping she'll come save me from this man, or from myself.

But she's nowhere to be found.

There are no allies here.

Only *him*.

Vaughn opens a door at the side of the open area where the party is being held, and I shiver when he reaches back, wraps a strong hand around my upper arm, and yanks me after him into the darkness beyond. I gasp sharply as I almost trip over my heels before the door is slammed shut behind us.

A lone, flickering candle sitting on the back of the vanity casts dramatic, dancing shadows around the powder room. My eyes dart to him as he starts to loosen his tie.

“Anything you’d like to say?”

My throat tightens.

“I—*I’m sorry*,” I blurt. “I didn’t mean to throw my drink in your—”

“I don’t give a shit about your childish attempt to be petulant,” Vaughn murmurs.

It’s the cool, even tone of his voice that sends ice through my veins. He’s not angry. There’s no threat in his voice.

It’s just…*flat*.

Dead.

Inhuman.

“I don’t understand,” I say quietly.

Vaughn turns to me, his head tipping slightly to the side. “*Say it*,” he says quietly. His icy blue eyes suck the meager light from the small bathroom around us, until they’re almost glowing with a chilling intensity. “Say your word, Evelina.”

Slowly, I shake my head side to side.

Vaughn exhales. “Again, the absence of that word is your implied consent. Be quite sure you understand what you’re agreeing to.”

“I—” My voice breaks. “I understand.”

“No, you don’t,” he says quietly. “But you will.” He pulls his tie the rest of the way off, then wraps it slowly around one of his fists.

I start to tremble as I realize again I might have gotten in *way* over my head.

So why is that feeling inside me coiling even tighter?

Clenching.

Liquifying.

“There are rules, Evelina.”

He calmly shrugs his jacket off his broad shoulders. He methodically hangs it from a hook on the wall before he turns back to me and begins to roll up the sleeves of his dress shirt, revealing his muscled forearms, inked with the same dark, swirling images of skulls, violence, and death that the rest of his tattooed body is covered in.

The feeling inside me begins to shimmer and spark.

“While you’re under my control, I will *fuck* you: whenever, wherever, however, in any hole I choose. You’ll obey, or there’s the door.” He points to the locked bathroom door behind me. “Just say your word.”

I barely keep the shake from my voice. “I’m not going to.”

Vaughn’s lips pull into a hungry smile.

“*We’ll see about that*.”

He cracks his neck as he finishes rolling up his sleeves.

“I’m not going to make love to you.”

“I didn’t expect you would,” I croak.

“But you have a naive perspective on sex, given that you never *had it* before my cock introduced itself to your pretty cunt and bathed in your virgin blood.”

A shiver ripples down my spine, coiling and snaking through my lower belly.

“I’m saying this, Evelina,” he continues, “so that you understand that me fucking you does not mean we are in a relationship.”

“I know,” I mutter. “I’m not stupid.”

“Then say it out loud. The whole thing.”

My lips twist before I take a breath. “I know that you…”

“Say it,” he purrs.

My face throbs.

“That you *fucking me* does not mean we’re in a relationship.”

“You not saying your word,” he continues, “is implied consent to anything. Is that clear?”

I tremble. “W-what does *anything* mean?”

“I think it’s fairly self-explanatory.”

Heat flickers inside me.

“Will you hurt me?” I whisper. “Like you did last time?”

“Probably even more.”

Jesus.

My brows knit. “Does…does that turn you on?” I mumble, feeling my core tighten in a way I’m not sure I understand. “Hurting me?”

Vaughn’s eyes glint in the flickering candlelight.

“The way you *respond* to me hurting you does.” His jaw sets. “I don't get off on inflicting pain, Evelina. I get off on how that pain pushes you to *break* for me.”

I tremble. “So… It’s a power thing?”

“Obviously. Stop stalling.”

He steps toward me. I gasp quietly, retreating until my back hits the door.

“You…you said whenever, wherever, however…”

“And in any hole I choose, yes,” he growls, still slowly moving toward me, a predator stalking wounded prey.

My pulse skips. “What about *who*ever?” I say quietly.

Vaughn stops dead in his tracks, his face darkening.

“I mean, will there be other people involved?”

The words rattle like dry leaves from my mouth.

I don’t think I could do that. Submitting to *him* and his madness is one thing. But what if he wanted to offer me up to his friends like fresh meat?

“Vaughn,” I croak, my eyes wide. “I—”

“*No*.”

The word scrapes like a blade over his lips.

“Just me. You belong to *me*, and you will *not* be touching any other cocks but mine,” he hisses, a cold edge to his tone that scares me. “Do you understand?”

I nod quickly.

“Also, when I fuck you, I will be *fucking* you. No kissing. No cuddling.”

Vaughn stops right in front of me, towering over me, his sheer size pinning me to the door at my back. He raises his hands, unhurriedly uncoiling the tie from the fist it was wrapped around. He loops it and makes a knot, his eyes never leaving mine. He tightens it with a jerk that brings a gasp from my throat.

Then he hands me the tie.

I frown curiously, looking at the looped slip knot, the rest of it trailing down.

“Take it.”

My hands are trembling as I take the silk from his hands.

“Put the loop around your neck.”

My pulse skips, and a twisting sensation tightens low in my belly. My eyes snap to his, waiting for him to smile and admit he’s kidding.

He doesn't.

Because he’s not.

You not saying your word is implied consent.

I lift my arms, looping the tie over my head and letting it settle at my neck.

“Give me the end.”

I’m shaking as I hand him the length of silk. Vaughn takes it, his eyes locked with mine. Then, slowly, he pulls.

And pulls.

The tie tightens around my throat, not enough to choke me, but creating enough pressure that my pulse jangles and my core clenches.

“*Get on your knees*,” he murmurs.

My throat is dry and my heart is racing dangerously as my eyes meet his.

“*Now*, princess,” he growls.

Part of me still wants to defy him. Maybe another part wants let fly my safe word like a mic drop and just *leave*, to be done with all this insanity.

But the other part of me, that came alive the other night when he tackled me to the ground, and *fucked me* like a whore—and, yes, hurt me…

That part wins. That’s the part in charge when I find myself dropping to my knees on the powder room floor in front of him.

Vaughn’s blue eyes gleam.

“Take out my cock.”

When I hesitate, he tugs on the tie. The silk around my throat tightens slightly, making me whimper and jarring me into compliance. My hands shake as I reach for his belt, my vision tunneling as I fumble at it.

“I—I can’t get it open,” I mumble, my face heating.

Vaughn pushes my hands aside and undoes his belt buckle. Then he opens the button on his slacks before letting his arms drop to his sides again.

“Your turn.”

I swallow and reach for his zipper. I grasp it between my fingers, and when I tug it down, my face heats as I feel something heavy and thick twitch in his pants.

He’s already hard. Why does that excite me so much?

My thighs squeeze together as I undo the zipper the rest of the way. Then I grab his pants and pull them to his knees.

Jesus.

The front of his black boxer briefs tents *obscenely* right in front of my face. My face pales as I stare at it, my throat tightening as my gaze slides over the *huge* bulge throbbing in the black cotton.

My fingers slip into the waistband, and the pulse thudding in my ears becomes louder and higher as I start to peel his boxers down and off his grooved, muscled hips.

Suddenly, his cock springs free.

Holy.

Hell.

For a second, I’m literally frozen, just kneeling there *staring* at it.

Long. *So* thick, with a swollen, darker head. A pulsing vein winds down the shaft to the base, and big, heavy-looking balls hang between his legs.

I know I have almost nothing to compare it to. But I’ve seen porn. And this is *leagues* bigger than anything I’ve seen there.

How in the holy *hell* did that all fit inside me?!

“Open your mouth, princess.”

Heat floods my face. My core clenches. A needy ache builds between my legs.

“I…I mean…”

The corners of his lips curl in amusement. “You’ve never sucked cock before.”

I cringe and shake my head. “*No*,” I mumble.

“Well, tonight, all I need is for that mouth to be a wet *hole*. You’re not going to learn to *suck* my cock tonight, Evelina.” His eyes gleam again. “You’re going to be a good little whore and stay there on your knees while I *fuck your face*.”

I know—*I know*—that everything he’s saying right now should make me scream my safe word, possibly slap him, and go *running* back to my boring life.

I should be disgusted.

Turned off.

Indignant.

I’m…not.

I stare at his *huge*, bulging erection, curving up from his chiseled lower abs and the v-line grooves of his hips, and I don’t feel any of those things.

“Open your mouth, baby.”

Baby.

God, why do I love that he just said that?

I tremble, looking up at him past the cock bobbing in front of my face. My pulse hammers in my ears, my heart skipping as electricity ignites in my core.

I part my lips.

Vaughn takes his cock in his fist, his jaw clenched as he looks down at me and guides his swollen head toward my open, waiting mouth.

I whimper when the head forces my lips further open, stretching my jaw as he invades my mouth. I’m not prepared for the way he feels against my lips and tongue—like silk wrapped around an iron bar. Something slightly salty and sweet trickles over my tongue, and I shiver when I swallow it.

Vaughn groans, his eyes igniting and his jaw clenching. He pushes in deeper, making me instantly choke a little when his cock slides further in.

Then suddenly he thrusts harder, pushing his enormous dick into the back of my throat. Tears well in my eyes, and I gag and choke around his massive size as drool trickles out the corners of my mouth.

Vaughn pulls back, and I gasp violently when his cock slides out of my mouth.

It’s the exact same traitorous, consuming, electrifying feeling that zapped its way through my core a second ago, when he said I was going to be a “good little whore” while he "fucked my face".

The humiliation of it should disgust me. Or enrage me.

It does neither. In fact, it does the exact *opposite*.

Tears are still blurring my vision as I look up at him, sucking in another ragged breath of air, feeling my cheeks heat.

“Open.”

Part of me is mortified at how quickly I obey. The other part heats and melts as Vaughn’s fat, heavy cock pushes between my lips again, thrusting into the very back of my throat.

I cough and choke around his size. My gag reflex kicks in, hitching and spasming as he invades my mouth and cuts off my airways before sliding his glistening, throbbing cock back out.

A strand of spit hangs from the swollen head down to my bottom lip as I look up at him with tears trickling down from my eyes, my panties so wet that I swear they're going to start leaking down my thighs.

I don’t feel humiliated or demeaned kneeling there, panting for breath, with his cock waiting to fuck my face again.

I feel *alive*.

This time, I don’t wait for his command. I look up into his icy, gorgeous eyes, and open my mouth *wide*.

A vein throbs at his temple, and I see his jaw grind as his eyes gleam down into mine, filled with dark, consuming power.

“*Good girl*.”

He thrusts his cock into my mouth once more. This time, the sound that mingles with the lewd, gagging “gluck”s sets me on fire.

It’s a *moan*, from somewhere deviant deep within me.

Vaughn groans, and I whimper around his swollen cock as he threads the fingers of both his hands through my hair. He pins my head in place against the door, his hips pumping in and out, like my mouth is a pussy.

Drool drips freely over my chin, and I whimper again when he reaches down with one hand and suddenly yanks at the top of my dress. My breasts bounce free, nipples tight and achingly hard as he continues to fuck my mouth.

“Wouldn’t want to get cum and spit all over your pretty dress like a dumb cock slut, would we?”

Jesus Christ.

It’s like the harder he goes, and the filthier his words get, the more I get turned on. My thighs shamelessly squeeze together, my pussy dripping wet as I desperately seek friction and pressure from my panties.

A knock on the door has me choking and almost jumping out of my skin.

Vaughn goes still, but keeps the head of his cock between my lips.

The knock comes again.

“Hello?” a woman calls from the other side. “Is someone in there?”

“*Well*, princess?” Vaughn purrs, smiling malevolently down at me. “It’s rude not to answer.”

My face heats, and I bring my hands up to push his hips away and slide his cock from my mouth.

He slaps my hands away and shakes his head even as the knock comes again.

“*Answer the woman*,” Vaughn purrs.

He wants me to reply *with his cock still in my mouth*.

“Occupied!” I call out.

It comes out more like “*Awkoopaahd*”. Vaughn's grip on my hair tightens.

“Pardon?” the woman calls. “Sorry, there’s a line at the other guest bathroom.”

I whimper as Vaughn thrusts roughly into my mouth. He starts to pump in and out rapidly, his huge dick ramming the back of my throat over and over and filling the powder room with the sounds of my submission.

He reaches down, and I cry out around his cock as he pinches one of my nipples *hard* between his thumb and finger, twisting it mercilessly. Heat pools between my thighs, my body shaking against the door as he fucks my face with deep, brutal strokes.

Suddenly, I’m gasping for air, looking up at him with tears and mascara and spit all dripping down my face as he pulls out. He strokes his huge, veined, bulging cock right in front of me as our eyes lock.

“*Open wide, princess*.”

The first spurt of cum makes me flinch as it unexpectedly jets from his head and splatters my bottom lip. The next one lands across my tongue, then my chin.

Then my mouth again.

My cheek.

The bridge of my nose.

My neck.

My breasts.

I feel so. Fucking. *Powerful*.

It’s a sensation I’ve never felt before, and it fills my veins like liquid fire. Raw desire, femininity and sexuality explode through my body as I moan, my hands clenched on my thighs as they squeeze together.

“Please!?” the woman calls, banging on the door. “It’s kind of an emergency!”

My face throbs with heat as I start to stand. Vaughn grabs me tightly and spins us around.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” he growls into my ear as he pins my back to his chest, the two of us facing the mirror over the sink.

“I…*that woman—*”

“Can piss on the couch or shit her pants for all I care.”

That’s when I realize two things: one, I look like a complete and utter *whore*, my dress pulled down, my thighs quivering, and cum, spit, and blurred mascara all over my face.

And two?

Vaughn is still hard.

Very hard.

Suddenly, he's violently bending me over. I gasp, my hands going flat to the mirror as he shoves up my dress. My pulse jangles as he yanks my panties down to my knees, pushes my thighs apart, and brings his thick cock to my pussy.

“*Scream for me, baby.*”

He rams in with one powerful thrust. I choke out a grunted, desperate cry of pleasure, like an itch that’s been driving me crazy all day is being scratched at last. Like the pressure that’s been building inside me is finally able to escape.

I moan, my fingers clawing at the mirror in front of us as Vaughn grabs my hips and starts to fuck me *hard*.

The loud, wet slaps of his hips crashing against my butt fill the small room. I bite my lip, tasting his cum as I desperately try not to be too loud. But it’s a lost cause. His fingers dig into my hips and his huge dick thrusts deep inside me again and again, hitting places I didn’t even know were there.

He reaches up and grabs a fist of my hair in his hand, yanking my head back, forcing me to meet my own slutty reflection in the mirror.

“Look at you taking my cock, princess,” he growls viciously. “Look at what a whore you are, cum dripping off your face while you get fucked like a cheap slut.”

Slap. Slap. Slap.

I squeal in pleasure through clenched lips, arching my back as he pounds into me. His palm crashes into my butt, spanking me hard and tearing a cry from my throat. When he does it again I stop trying to be quiet, crying out and screaming for more as he fucks into me.

His hold on my hair tightens, pushing my face right against the mirror, his cum smearing on the glass as my whole body caves at the exquisite depravity of it all.

“You’re making such a mess of that mirror, princess,” he grunts, thrusting harder and faster as he bends over me to let his lips brush my ear. “*Clean it up*.”

God help me.

I do.

My core tightens and spasms as my tongue darts out of my mouth and starts licking the cum from the mirror while Vaughn keeps fucking me like a machine.

I’m dimly aware of the woman knocking at the door again. Of Vaughn telling me to answer her, and me babbling something about “almost being done” as his gorgeous cock scrapes against a magical spot inside me over and over, until my legs are shaking and my toes are curling in my shoes.

He slaps my ass. Pulls my hair. Fucks the *shit* out of me.

Finally, I can’t take anymore.

“*Vaughn*—!”

“*Come for me, baby. Be a good little whore and come all over my fat fucking dick.*”

Jesus…

“There’s a fucking *line* out here!” the voice yells through the door.

“*Coming!*” I shriek back. “*I’m commmmiinngg*!!”

My whole body stiffens and shudders and breaks apart at the seams as the biggest orgasm of my life rips me to pieces. Vaughn groans, thrusting deep and then gripping my hair and hip tightly as his cock erupts. I cry out when I feel his muscles coil and hot cum exploding inside me, painting my inner walls as he holds himself there, both of us shaking and gasping for air.

I’m clinging for dear life to the sink and the mirror as I feel him start to slide out. I whimper when he slips free, feeling his cum starting to leak out of me.

Without a word, he reaches down and pulls my panties back up.

“*Keep my cum right there.*”

I’m still slumped over the sink as he tucks himself back into his pants and zips up. He pulls his jacket back on and calmly unknots his tie from around my neck before slipping it into his pocket. Then he checks himself over in the mirror and fixes his hair.

My breath is still coming out in shaky gasps as he leans down to my ear.

“*Good girl*. Now put yourself back together. Someone needs the bathroom.”

I barely have time to lurch away from the sink and hide behind the door before Vaughn opens it and steps out.

“About time!” The woman says tightly. “I need—”

“To wait your fucking turn,” Vaughn growls. “She’ll be out in a second.”

He shuts the door, and I hear the woman vaguely say “She?”

I can barely stand as I turn to look at myself in the mirror.

Good lord.

Blushing, I quickly pull my dress back up and try to get it back into place. I use wet paper towels to clean my face as best as I can, then tame my hair so it doesn't look like I just shot hardcore porn in the powder room.

"And what *exactly* were you doing that took so long?"

The woman is right in my face when I finally open the door. She folds her arms over her chest, looking smug, like she's just caught me red-handed doing something I should be ashamed of.

For a second, old Evelina takes over. The Evelina I've lived as for twenty-three years, who doesn't step out of line, doesn't do anything scandalous, and does *not*, in any capacity, have raw, deranged sex in bathrooms at parties.

That Evelina almost blurts a quiet apology before running away to bury her head under her pillow at home for the next month.

But then, *new* Evelina takes over.

I don't know this woman glaring at me. I've never seen her before, and there's a good chance I'll never see her again.

Also?

I *haven't* done anything wrong.

"Oh—in there?" I smile at her, delicately dabbing a finger at my lipstick before I lean closer. "I was getting *fucked*."

Her eyes go wide.

"*Really hard*," I add with a big smile on my face. "Enjoy the party!"

Then baby saunters off to go find herself another glass of champagne.

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18

VAUGHN

"THANKS FOR THIS."

My jaw grinds as I look at my brother across the table. "I'm not doing this for him, you know. I'm doing it for you."

Val rolls his eyes. "Which is why I just *thanked* you, dick."

"I just want to be clear—"

"Vaughn, there is nothing that has been made *clearer* to me in the last few months than your opinions of our father."

I smirk. "As in, I liked him better when I thought he was dead?"

"Jesus *fucking*…" Val looks away, shaking his head. "How's the Syndicate. How's your Bond villain mansion. How're your psycho little friends."

"Fine. Palatial. Still psychotic," I grunt. "How's your boy toy?"

"*Don't*." Val's gaze rips across the table into me. "I fucking hate when you act like Roman is a fling. We live together. He's not going anywhere. I *love* him."

I glance down. "Sorry. I…" I exhale. "I know that. My apologies."

Once upon a time, my brother and I were close. We had to be, growing up in the traumatic hellscape of emotional abuse, physical neglect and poverty that we were raised in. Our mom turned tricks in the living room. Dad boosted carburetors and dabbled in whatever bullshit petty crime he could.

Now, there are a million kids out there with parents who turn to the dark side and do whatever the fuck it takes to put food in their stomachs and keep a roof over their heads.

But our parents didn’t do what they did for us.

They did it for themselves. For *drugs*.

Oxy. Heroin. Meth. I distinctly remember the scent of paint thinner and gasoline when they ran out of money and had to resort to huffing those.

But the neglect was the good part. It’s the rest of it that almost broke us.

When Mom’s temper got physical. When one of her Johns would slip into the glorified closet that Val and I called a bedroom and try and touch us. When Dad stole the shitty, fourth-hand toys Val and I had and pawned them for meth money.

The story Val's heard is that eventually one winter, when the heat had been cut off, the kitchen was empty, and Mom and Dad had been AWOL for three days straight, we left.

Rather, *I* left, and I took Val with me.

We bundled up in whatever clothes we could layer and I took him downtown with the harebrained idea of sneaking into the luggage compartment of a bus at the Greyhound station.

Instead, we stumbled across a furniture store; one that looked so fucking warm, with big, soft beds in the window. I broke in the back door and brought us inside, my brother blue in the face and half dead, only to discover that the store was actually a front for a safe house and drug distribution center belonging to the Obsidian Syndicate.

Instead of killing us, they took us in, brought us to New York, gave us a place to live and food to eat, asking only that we commit ourselves to the organization in return.

We worked in a warehouse for a few years, packaging up drugs for street-level sale until the DEA came crashing in one day.

Val was knocked unconscious by a flash grenade, and I made a choice.

A *really fucking hard* one.

I decided that he deserved a shot at something beyond a life of crime. So I told the Syndicate guards that he was dead, left him my wallet, and escaped.

Val was found by the cops, with a wallet containing a few bucks and *my* YMCA ID card, and no memory of who he really was.

We had some hard years after that. I was clawing my way up through the lower ranks of the Syndicate. He was fighting for survival in the foster system of New York—as *Vaughn*, since he had no memory of who he was aside from an ID with a photo that looked a lot like him since we've always looked so similar, and the name "Vaughn Bancroft" on it.

Again, this is the story he knows, because that's what I've *told him*.

The real one is too hard to explain.

How do you tell someone that you've had various other personalities *inside your head* since you were old enough to remember? How do you explain that the real reason you left home that night was because the manifested personality of a grandfather you'd never met had been talking to you at night for weeks? That this ghost is who told you about the safe house and guided you there that night into the arms of an organization *that he once called family*?

Yeah. Needless to say, I haven't told Val that part.

There's a *lot* I haven't told him. It's probably why there's still this wall up between us, even after reconnecting over a year ago, and why I unintentionally always seem to say the wrong thing to him.

"Val."

He glares at me across the table. "What."

"I'm sorry. Truly. I wasn't trying to imply that Roman isn't important to you."

He looks away. "I know you don't like it, though. Us, I mean."

“Jesus, Val.” I frown. “I couldn’t give less of a fuck who you love, guy or girl.”

He rolls his eyes. “I don’t mean you’re homophobic, dickhead. We both know you're not. I mean you disapprove because of Roman’s last name.”

I very purposefully keep my mouth shut.

“See?”

“What?” I finally growl. “Want me to lie? You’re right. I don’t like that you’re quite *literally* in bed with the bratva.”

“Says the man who leads a fucking global criminal empire!” he tosses back.

I want to flip the table and scream that I did *everything* I could to keep him away from that life. That I never wanted him to end up anywhere near the life our parents lived, or I later chose.

But if I do that, I lose him. And as much as we sometimes drive each other nuts, he’s still my kid brother.

I hold up my hands. “Okay, truce. Please.”

“Fine,” Val grunts. Then he flashes me a small smile. “But only because you showed tonight. Seriously, thank you. I know you still have your differences—”

“Let’s just drop it, okay?”

Like I said, I liked Morgan Bancroft much better when I thought he’d ODed on heroin with our mom twelve years ago.

Then, four months ago, he came back from the dead.

It turns out that while our mom *had* ODed, Morgan managed to get a shot of Naloxone into him before the drugs could finish him off.

Since he assumed that Val and I had both died after running away years before, he left McKeesport and spent the next twelve years finding himself in Alaska.

Himself and, *allegedly*, sobriety.

That is, until he saw Val’s name and photo in a *New York Magazine* article about masculinity and the arts, and reached out.

My brother thinks it’s nothing short of a fucking Hallmark movie miracle.

I vehemently disagree.

“He’s fucking *late*,” I growl, glaring at my watch.

Val sighs. “It’s fine.”

“You only get the table for ninety minutes,” I say flatly. “This place has two Michelin stars, Val.”

He shoots me a look. “Didn’t you tell me you *own* the joint?”

“Part owner,” I mutter. “But it’s the principle of the thing. You’d think after being a top five contender for world’s shittiest father, he'd make the effort to *show the fuck up* on time.”

My brother gives me a cold look. “Will you cut him some slack? He’s *trying*, Vaughn.”

“He's an addict.”

He shoots me a venomous glare. “People can change.”

I shake my head. “No, they can't.”

Shit.

Roman is in recovery for alcohol abuse. Six months sober.

“That…came out wrong,” I grunt. “Sorry.”

Val shakes his head and looks away.

“What I meant to say,” I sigh, “was that I don’t give a shit if he’s over his addiction. What I give a shit about it the *hell* he put us through.”

Again, Val doesn’t know the *half* of it, and never will. Because I love him, even if he and the happiness he's found with Roman annoy the fuck out of me.

“He actually wants to talk about that, if you’ll let him,” Val says. “We’ve had some really good talks, just the two of—”

“I don’t think you should do that.”

His jaw clenches. “Duly noted.”

I drum my fingers on the tablecloth and then glance at the time again.

“By the way,” I say, “it’s come to my attention that your phone isn’t always as secure as it should be.”

Val grins. “You worried about the nudes I send to Roman leaking?”

I roll my eyes. “Some of the conversations we have over text have strict guidelines—“

“*Relax*, James Bond,” Val sighs. “I'm not an idiot. I delete anything incriminating. Also, hello, I’m in a relationship with someone like you?”

No, you’re not.

Just then, Val stands, grins, and walks past me.

Fuck me.

I turn, my face a mask as I watch Morgan embrace Val warmly, both of them grinning like they’re old buddies.

Val has really warmed to Morgan’s “sober life, settling old debts” routine.

I haven’t. And I fucking *won’t*.

I know Val had his own horrors to deal with later in life, in the foster system. But my horrors came knocking much earlier, and this motherfucker wasn’t there to protect me, his own son, his own flesh and fucking blood, from them.

I actually knew Morgan had lived. I knew he'd been playing out *Old Man and the Sea* fantasies in the Alaskan tundra for more than a decade.

But when Val and I first reconnected I told him Morgan had died with our mom because *I wanted to protect my brother*.

Morgan and Val finally pull apart and clap each other on the shoulder. Before I know what's happening, Morgan spins, rushes me, and throws his arms around me in a bear hug I didn't ask for and sure as *shit* don't want.

I stand there, arms stiff at my side and my nerves screaming before I manage to pull back.

Outwardly, I smile coldly.

Inside, I'm losing my fucking *shit*.

"Excuse me a minute," I growl before I turn and walk to the men's room.

The door has barely closed behind me before I whirl and slam my knuckles into it so hard that it dents. I do it again, then again, only stopping when my hand roars in protest.

I run my knuckles under cold water, then grip the sides of the basin and stare into the rushing faucet. I lean down and splash my face, swallowing and tugging at my collar before I lean over the sink again, breathing hard.

My eyes lift to the mirror in front of me.

The flicker of the monster behind my eyes. The swirling anger.

Hello, Demon.

But that can't happen now. Not here. Not any of them.

I swallow the feeling down, steadying my breathing, trying to slow my galloping pulse before I exhale slowly.

I pop a Klonopin and splash some more water on my face.

"He was no son of mine."

I close my eyes, gritting my teeth as I grip the edge of the sink tighter.

"But he *was*, Quentin."

My eyes are still closed, but I can *feel* my grandfather shaking his head. "Biologically, sure. But we both know he was never strong enough to do

what you have. He was weak. He gave in to poison. Neglected the two of you. Let your mother poison *herself*—"

"He hated you," I mutter quietly.

"Of course he did. Mediocrity despises success."

I nod, slowly inhaling and exhaling, my eyes still shut.

Finally, I return from the restroom. Val keeps his ass sitting. But Morgan stands from his chair as I approach the table again.

"I'm sorry, son—"

"Don't ever fucking do that again."

His brow knits. "Do what?"

"Touch me. Just *don't*."

"*Vaughn*," Val hisses.

"And don't call me that, either," I growl, looking right at Morgan. "*Son*."

We sit. We order some food. I deliberately order a drink I don't intend to touch so I can watch the struggle behind the eyes of the pathetic, weak man at the table.

He and Val are chatting away about fuck knows what.

The Klonopin isn't working. I can *feel* the darkness inside stretching awake.

I need to get the fuck out of here. Lock myself away until the episode passes.

And yet?

There's a needy hunger in me, and only one thing will sate it.

One *woman*.

The one I've been claiming, bit by fucking bit.

Taking every innocence. Every first.

I looked into that Ethan motherfucker. Not out of any pathetic *jealousy* or anything. Just out of curiosity.

Okay, fuck it, jealousy too.

But the brief little romance between Evelina and that chuckle-fuck was about as steamy as an animated Disney princess movie. Ethan was *very* forthcoming after I fed him eight cocktails and half a dose of sodium pentothal.

The only reason he left the bar alive the other night was because he admitted he'd never fucked, gone down on, or had his dick sucked by *my* princess.

He did mention some hand stuff. *Luckily* for those hands and their fondness for remaining attached to his wrists, Ethan is engaged now, and apparently quite taken with his fiancée.

Plus, I was feeling generous that night.

But all this is to say that I know that every line I cross with her is the first time that line has been conquered.

We should go do some conquering right now, don't you think?

Why not.

I stand abruptly. "Something's come up with work. I have to run."

Val glares at me. I give him a half shrug.

"Aww, c'mon." Morgan tries to smile at me. "Stay. Please? I mean, you haven't even touched your drink—"

"You thirsty, Morgan?"

"*Such* a fucking prick," Val hisses as I smile tightly at them both. Then I turn and walk away, making sure to let the management know on my way out to run my card for whatever Val and Morgan order.

"Vaughn!"

I’m halfway down the block when I hear Morgan calling my name. My mouth twists as I turn to look at him expectantly.

He frowns, shaking his head and picking at his fingers before he looks at me. “I just…I… I wish I could start over with you.”

“I don’t believe in wishes, Morgan,” I growl. “I stopped doing that when I was five. What I *do* believe in is *making things happen*.”

Morgan sighs, shaking his head. “You sound just like your grandfather.”

“If you're saying I sound like him more than I do you, I’ll take the compliment.”

“Only because you didn’t know him, Vaughn,” Morgan says tightly.

But I do know him.

WE know him.

“Don’t keep meeting up with and talking to Val,” I spit.

He frowns. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t try and cultivate a fucking relationship with him. He’s been through enough. And it’s a cheap shot. You know damn well he doesn’t remember our childhood with you and Mom.”

The beauty of childhood amnesia, courtesy the DEA flash grenade.

“I know you both went through hell, Vaughn,” Morgan hisses. “And I know I wasn’t there to—”

“Yeah, I’m over it. Also, I don’t care,” I growl. Then I stab a finger at him. “Just stay the fuck away from Val.”

“*Why*?” he spits as I start to turn.

“You know damn well why.”

“Vaughn—”

“Do *not* push me on this, Morgan.”

My voice is quiet and even but laced with power as our eyes lock.

Morgan's head slowly shakes from side to side.

“You sound just like my father,” he murmurs.

“If that repels you, *great*.”

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, I’m with Sebastian down in the basement under a Syndicate building in the Seaport, raining *hell* down on another of the would-be coup planners who is still loyal to Étienne, my predecessor.

Gordon Stone and Jameson Beaumont were too important for me to kill.

…This poor fucker is a nobody, though. Tonight, that makes him a dead man.

But even after I’ve punched a gallon of blood out of his nose and mouth, let Sebastian have a turn, and then taken over myself again, the voices in my head are still screaming.

Demon and I both know he needs to come out. And it would appear there’s only one way for that to happen these days

God help her.

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19

EVELINA

It's dark when I open my eyes. My pulse feels a little elevated, and a tingle hums through my body.

A lingering flush.

A fluttering between my legs.

The house is utterly still, and consciousness is still filtering into my brain as I glance at the clock on the bedside table. Why am I awake at two in the morning?

Warm air teases over my bare skin—

What the hell?

I'm suddenly *very* alert as I sit up a little and look down at myself.

The t-shirt I went to sleep in is now hiked up over my breasts. My sleep shorts and panties are pulled down to my knees, my legs are splayed.

Was I…*touching myself* in my sleep?

Then I peer at myself in the darkness.

There's…something wet on me.

Splattered across my breasts, my stomach, and all over my pussy and thighs.

I hesitantly bring a hand to my stomach, shivering when my fingers slide through the warm, viscous fluid streaked in long lines across my skin.

I rub some between my fingers, peering at it as I bring my hand closer.

Oh. My. GOD.

A tremor rips through my body, my hand jerking away from my face.

It's *cum*.

For half a second, I'm in total, frozen shock. My mouth falls open, and I just *stare* at the glistening cum on my fingertips, then down to the splatters of it all over my body.

A voice inside screams at me to, well, *scream*.

To be horrified.

To be furious at the man who did this to me. I know *exactly* who it was, and not just because there's only one person I can think of who would be deranged enough to break into this fortress of a house to do this.

I know because he's left me a calling card.

A black Bauta mask painted with ornate venom-green filigree sits at the foot of the bed, staring at me.

I don't scream.

I don't feel the nauseating embrace of horror and revulsion I know I should. And when I shiver, it's not because I feel sick or violated.

Rather, my pulse quickens. My core clenches, and my nipples, glistening with Vaughn's cum, tighten to points as my breath catches.

I know I should be calling this "assault". But as much as I try to push my thoughts in that direction, they refuse to comply. Just like the electricity refuses to stop zipping over my skin.

The throb between my legs doesn't go away. And when I feel my insides liquify, I'm helpless to stop my hands from slowly returning to my body.

I shudder as my fingers trace slow circles through the cum. The skin beneath my fingertips heats, and a shaky gasp tumbles from my throat.

Then, when my hands slide up to cup my breasts and my thumbs glide over the stickiness coating my nipples, the gasp transforms, becoming low.

Becoming broken and needy.

Becoming a moan.

I'm helpless to stop it from bubbling out as my body writhes slowly on the bed. I pinch my nipples, whimpering as I rub the sticky fluid into them, sending more electricity sparking through my core.

My body heats, my thighs shaking as my fingertips trace over my belly, then lower.

A desperate, needy sound chokes from my throat when my fingers glide over the pools of sticky white cum on my pussy. My fingers slip through it, and I cry out as I let one finger delve between my lips.

Oh God…

My back arches off the sheets as my fingers roll over my throbbing clit, and the achy groan resonates in my throat.

I start to rub faster, my face caving at the sheer depravity of massaging *his cum* into my swollen clit as my hips roll. My other hand squeezes my breasts, roughly twisting my sticky, wet nipples as I turn my head to moan into the pillow.

Vaughn was *here*.

While I slept.

He broke into my home, pulled my clothes off, and…

I sink a finger into my pussy, gasping as I curl it deep against my front wall. I can feel Vaughn's cum dripping and sliding over my skin like a staked claim, leaving hot trails across my body as I rub my clit faster and pinch my nipples harder.

My knees begin to shake as I add a second finger, pushing them deep into my pussy, starting to grind my clit against my palm.

He was here.

He took my clothes off and did God-knows-what to me *while I slept*, which is supremely fucked up.

Deranged.

Criminal.

So why are you close to coming right now?

My moans grow louder and more broken, my body shuddering and shaking as I grind my pussy harder against the heel of my hand. My other hand slips up to my neck and through the cum drying there before I slide it over my jaw toward my mouth. My lips wrap around a slick, sticky finger.

…And my body *shatters*.

I cry out, my hips jerking and shaking as I start to come. Slickness squirts against my hand, and I moan loudly as I suck the cum from my fingers.

His cum.

His claim.

His reiteration that we're *not* done.

My hand keeps rubbing my pussy, my body writhing as I groan around the finger in my mouth. Suddenly, I come again.

What is wrong with me?

I'm broken. Deranged. In genuine need of psychiatric help.

…Because I desperately crave *more*.

* * *

"I—I'M doing my best. It's not like I can just *ask*—"

“Your best, Ms. Nikitin,” the man on the other end of the line growls icily, “is proving to be *not good enough*.”

My fingers tighten on the phone as I listen to Joaquin, Diego’s second-in-command.

“Get Señor Torvallés what he asked for,” he finishes. “Or there *will* be consequences.”

The line goes dead. I take a shaky breath.

It’s been almost three weeks since the initiation.

The first time Vaughn went radio silent on me, after that night where he took my virginity and my sanity in the graveyard, I felt abandoned. Even when I tried to tell myself how absurd that was, or how childish it was to be upset that someone who was *clearly* a casual hookup wasn’t calling me.

But Vaughn’s disappeared for longer this time, and I don’t have the same feelings of self-doubt.

Not because I’ve conquered my emotional vulnerabilities or pulled up my big-girl panties.

Because I know he’s not really gone.

Vaughn hasn’t *officially* spoken to me in the ten days since the night of the party at Sebastian’s penthouse, where he hauled me into the powder room and, for lack of a better way to put it, turned me into his eager, submissive slut.

And yet he *has* seen me since that evening, five times.

While I’m sleeping.

The next time it happened was two days after the night I woke up with his cum all over my body. He left my face decorated, and I slowly awoke to the feel of him dripping down my cheeks and sliding over my tongue.

Same as before, my shirt was pulled up and my shorts and panties were down at my knees. This time, though, I knew he’d done more than look.

From the slight soreness between my legs and my own arousal smeared over my upper thighs, I'm pretty sure he had his fingers in me.

The third and fourth times, too.

But the fifth time, just the other night, I know he tried to have full penetrative sex with me. Tried but *didn't*, because there's no way in hell he could put that dick inside me and not have its sheer size wake me instantly.

But something a lot bigger than fingers had been inside me. Plus, his cum was all over my pussy and dripping liberally from between my lips.

The rational part of me has been taking a backseat role the last couple of weeks. But she's still there, *screaming* at me to wake up and realize how messed up this is.

A man I'm not in a relationship with is somehow breaking into my bedroom almost every night, exposing my body to his gaze, touching me, and *using me* before leaving his cum all over me and…disappearing.

The rational part of me wants to scream words like "assault" or "rape".

And yet, I refuse to let those words define what this is, because they're not the right ones to describe this vicious, depraved game.

The absence of that word is your implied consent.

He might still be ignoring me. But that doesn't mean I couldn't call him and leave a voice message with my safe word. Or I could text it to him, and this madness would stop.

But I haven't.

And the longer this goes on, the more unsure I am that I ever will.

* * *

"EVIE!"

I turn, blushing a little when I see Val jogging down the alley behind the Mercury Theater to catch up to me, his heavy dance bag slung over his

broad shoulder.

“I need to apologize,” he sighs, frowning. “I mean, for earlier this morning.” His face twists. “Fuck, I can tell you’re weirded out. Evie, I am *so* fucking sorry. We both seriously thought you’d already left. I know that’s no excuse.”

For a second, I almost laugh.

Val thinks my face is heated right now because I walked into the kitchen two hours ago to find him totally naked except for heavy firefighter’s boots and a matching hat, pouring two cups of coffee. At least he was facing *away* from me.

But that’s not why I’m blushing right now.

No, I’m blushing because it’s *impossible* for me to face my friend these days without remembering that his older brother has been sneaking into my room at night to touch me, expose me, and come all over my body.

I quickly shake my head, smiling awkwardly. “It’s fine.”

“It’s really not,” he frowns. “It’s *your* house. I’m just an…interloper.”

I roll my eyes. “Val, you’re not an *interloper*. You’re the reason Roman smiles now and doesn’t drink anymore.”

He shrugs. “I don’t know about that.”

“*I* do.”

He grins at me. “Still no reason to walk around your house like a stripper.”

I wink impishly. “The question is… Did you put the fire out?”

Instantly, I’m covering my face in mortification as Val’s jaw drops, his eyes dancing. “Evelina Nikitin!” he hoots. “Was that a fucking *sex joke*?! From *you*?!” He flinches dramatically, looking up at the clouds in mock horror.

“What's wrong?”

“Just checking to see if the sky is falling,” he says, smirking.

I roll my eyes. “*Ha ha ha*. I make jokes all the time.”

“Not with innuendo, though—” His brow lifts sharply as his jaw drops open.

“What?”

“Are… Are you getting *laid*, Evie?”

My face bursts into flames. “What?!” I blurt. “No!” I gulp, shuddering. “*No*! Obviously not. *Definitely* not.”

Technically, that’s true. Not since the bathroom at Sebastian’s party, at least.

“Definitely not what?”

Milena comes traipsing up the alley behind us, also lugging her dance bag.

“Evelina just told a dick joke,” Val grins. “And I was speculating if that meant she’s finally *taken a lover*.”

Milena snorts and rolls her eyes. Then she turns and gives me a surprised look. “Wait, *you* told a dick joke?”

“I—”

Val barges in, telling her the whole sorry tale.

“Dude, *wear pants* in that house!” Milena chastises him. “Our sweet Evie doesn’t need to see *your* balls in *her* kitchen!”

Val grins sheepishly. “I’m truly sorry.”

I sigh heavily. “It’s *fine*. Really. I didn’t see anything except for your bum—”

“You’re welcome.”

Milena cuffs Val upside the head.

“But even if I had…guys…” I shake my head. “I’m *not* going to fall apart just because I see a dick, okay?”

The two of them exchange a “look”, then their conversation quickly devolves into backstage gossip. Apparently Miguel, another of the male dancers in the Zakharova, has just split up with his long-time girlfriend, and may or may not be hooking up with Kelsey, one of the newer members of the *corps de ballet*.

I'm struggling to keep up when my phone dings with a text.

GABRIELLA

Hey girl! Want to arrive together tonight? I was thinking 10:30.

My brow furrows.

ME

Arrive?

GABRIELLA

The party at the Moon Room in midtown. I think it’s going to get wild :p.

Thanks for the invitation, Vaughn.

I almost make up some lame excuse, but then decide to just tell her.

ME

I wasn’t invited :(

ME

But have fun!

Gabby texts back immediately.

GABRIELLA

Are you fucking serious?? It’s another Adept-Acolyte party. Pretty sure your Adept HAS to invite you. Like, he’ll definitely be there himself.

ME

Well, he didn’t. But it’s fine. I have conditioning after rehearsal today. I’ll be ready for the couch and pjs lol.

GABRIELLA

Not happening. Sorrynotsorry.

I grin.

GABRIELLA

You can be my date if your Adept sucks enough that he didn't mention it. Fuck it, let's have fun tonight. Dress slutty. I'll pick you up at 10.

ME

lol I don't know…

GABRIELLA

SO SLOOOOOTY. We're making boys do stupid shit tonight.

I grin and slip my phone away. When I look up, I realize Val has already gone inside but Milena is still in the alley with me.

She's looking at me sternly, cocking a brow like she's studying me.

"What?" I mumble.

"*Are* you sleeping with someone?" she asks quietly, a grin on her face.

My face throbs. "What? *No*!"

Liar liar pants on fire.

She laughs. "I didn't think so. But I *am* curious why you're suddenly saying words like *dick*."

I roll my eyes. "Because I'm a grownup?"

She gives me a look.

"It's just historically not a word that's part of your vocabulary," she says pointedly. "And it makes me wonder what's up with you."

I chew on my bottom lip. "Nothing is *up* with me."

She nods. "All right. But if there is, you know I'm always here." She glances at the time on her phone. "Shit, we should get inside."

We're heading for the dressing rooms when I clear my throat.

"Milena?" I say quietly. "How, uh…" I groan. "Never mind. Forget it."

"Not happening."

She gently takes my shoulders and peers at me. “C’mon, Evie. Talk to me.”

I flush. “Say…say there’s a guy…”

She beams widely but stays silent.

“And…we’re going to be at the same party, and I want to get his attention…”

She frowns pensively. “Total stranger?”

I shake my head.

“So, you’ve talked before.”

Look at you taking my cock, princess. Look at what a whore you are, cum dripping off your face while you get fucked like a cheap slut.

I nod. “Uh…yup.”

“And now he’s giving you the cold shoulder?”

I scowl, looking down at my hands. “Umm…sort of.”

Milena’s face darkens. “Then you tell your girl Milena who he is so I can go *cut* the motherfucker.”

I giggle. “What if I don’t want to resort to physical violence *quite* yet?”

She shrugs. “Easy. Make him jealous.”

I frown. “How?”

“You know, flirt with another guy in front of him. Bring a date to an event he’s at. Petty shit like that.” She grins. “I’m not saying it’s classy, but it *is* effective.”

I nod thoughtfully. “Okay…thanks.”

“You’re not going to tell me who it is, are you?”

My face burns. “Probably not.”

She sighs. “He’s not made up, is he? Because, honey, I love you, but that would get real sad *real* fast—”

“He’s not *imaginary*,” I laugh.

My core tightens.

The bruises on my skin tingle.

“Trust me. He’s real.”

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EVELINA

GABBY ENDS up picking me up at eight instead of ten and brings me back to her place to get ready together. She has an *insane* wardrobe, and even though she's got more pronounced curves than I do, we're around the same size.

On the one hand, I love that she convinced me to come with her. She's become a "Milena" type influence on me, although she pushes me more than Milena does. On the other, my dress tonight is not one I would *ever* normally wear. It's not even something Milena would see in a store and suggest I try.

It's *way* too scandalous.

"Breathe," she laughs quietly as we step out of the elevator and into the Moon Room, a *stunning*, ultra-luxe cocktail lounge and club on the top floor of one of midtown's newest and tallest buildings. "You look hot as *fuck*."

The shimmery, cowl-neck dress—pink, duhh—is crazy revealing, with a neckline that plunges halfway to my navel, a low back hovering just above my butt crease, and a hemline that straddles the line between sexpot and whore.

And yet, the cut, the material, and the way it fits keep things elegant and out of stripper territory. I think a lot of that is my slimmer, athletic build. Gabby's butt and boobs in this thing would stop traffic.

“So do you,” I grin, eying the jaw-dropping blood-red number she’s wearing that goes stunningly with her tanned Italian complexion and dark hair.

“Well, then let’s go mingle and make your Adept feel like an idiot for forgetting to invite you.”

I have theories about hers, and I’m sure she does too about mine. But we have this unspoken thing where we still haven’t told each other who our Adepts are. I’ve brought it up, but Gabby keeps brusquely shutting it down. It's strange, considering all the other ways she’s constantly breaking the rules.

We grab champagne from the bar set up at one side of the massive lounge. I feel a nervous throb of excitement ripple through me as I survey the scene, taking a bigger gulp of bubbly than I should.

“You need to calm down, King,” says a rough, low voice behind me.

“*Fuck that*,” another voice snarls. “What I need to do is go tear Anderson a new asshole and *fuck him* in it.”

I glance over my shoulder and stiffen when I realize who it is.

Gabby filled me in on Carson King, Gideon Wick and Sebastian Bourne before the last party, explaining they were Vaughn’s closest friends as well as Syndicate inner circle. Carson’s the truly unhinged, manic, crazy one, which feels jarring when you look at his Prince Charming features—blond hair, blue eyes, perfect smile. Sebastian, physically the biggest of the group, is apparently pure malice and brutality. And Gideon, with his dark hair and dark blue eyes, constantly has a lethally brooding, frankly terrifying aura about him.

Right now, it’s Carson who looks like he wants to murder someone with his bare hands, and Gideon who is trying to talk him down, both of them standing behind me and just around the corner of the hallway leading to the bathrooms.

“You *know* Anderson is an asshole,” Gideon says. His voice has an edge to it that sends shivers down my spine. He reminds me of Vaughn: he *looks* and sounds totally calm, but if you’re paying attention, there’s clearly

something dark and brimming with power right under the surface. “It’s his default setting. Chill.”

“I don’t like parent jokes,” Carson seethes, his jaw working as his piercing blue eyes scan the room like he’s looking for something to destroy. “They’re off limits for me, and Anderson fucking knows it.”

Gideon sighs. “Which is exactly why he went there. He likes riling you up, especially since Bancroft didn’t elevate him to the council a few months ago. Can you let it go?”

“Would you *let it go* if someone was saying shit like that about your mother?”

Gideon shrugs. “I wouldn't know. I don't remember mine.” He frowns. “Besides, you hate your parents.”

“Yeah, but they’re *mine* to hate. Shitheads like Anderson don’t get to score low blows like that. I *know* my mom was a whore who fucked anyone with money and power. I *know* the chances of my dad being my actual dad are probably zero. But fucked if Anderson gets to say it. I'll throw him off the fucking roof.”

I stiffen, my eyes widening.

Holy crap, what?

Diego Torvallés knows his heir is in the Syndicate, and part of the inner circle.

Is it *Carson*? Could it be that simple?

My heart leaps as I consider that this whole search might be over. What if I could end all this madness tonight? Get in touch with Diego, tell him what I’ve just heard? If I'm right, I’m just…*done*.

No more need to join the Syndicate. No more unhinged, violent sexual encounters that leave me questioning my own sanity. No more nocturnal visits that leave me wet and streaked with cum. I could say my word and end it all.

But would you?

“I have to go deal with something,” Gideon growls. “Can you promise you won’t do anything supremely stupid like throwing someone off a balcony?”

“No.”

Gideon glares at him and slides closer. “*Go find your distraction, then*,” he hisses. “Blow off some steam with her.”

Carson scowls. “I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Gideon mutters, patting his friend on the back before turning and winding his way through the party.

Meanwhile, Carson’s still grinding his teeth murderously as he grabs his phone from his pocket and stabs out a message.

Gabby’s phone dings from within her clutch. I frown as I watch her pull it out, glance at it, then slip it back in with a scowl.

“Let’s go meet some new people.”

My brows knit. “Who was that?”

She shrugs, looking away. “Just my brother checking in on me like an overprotective psycho. C’mon!” Her eyes dart past me for a fraction of a second before she grabs my arm. “Let’s go dance and meet some guys,” she says loudly.

I let her pull me away from the bar. We’ve got a whole *crowd* of men hovering around us within minutes of hitting the dance floor. Despite the dress and the new “non-virgin” status, though, I’m not ever, in any situation, “the sexy one”. I’m too awkward to flirt. Too shy. Too naive. It’s also blatantly obvious that all the guys only have eyes for Gabby.

I lean into her ear to ask if she wants to go get more drinks. She says I should go ahead, but that she wants to stay and dance.

I’m halfway back to the bar for a second drink I one hundred percent do *not* need when something across the room catches my eye.

Some*one*.

Someone with piercing, icy blue eyes that stab across the entire party from the front door he’s just walked through.

Instantly, it’s as if the whole party goes on mute. Like everyone pauses around me. His eyes narrow on me, and I can see the “what are you doing here” in his gaze clear as day. His jaw grinds, and when he tilts his head slightly and lets his eyes slice into me, I find myself backing up a step, trembling.

“You must be the new plaything.”

I turn to see a pretty woman around my age with dark hair, sitting primly in a wheelchair, looking up at me.

“I’d make a big show of being embarrassed that I can’t remember your name…” The brunette says in a lyrical French accent as she smiles coldly at me. “But I’m not.”

Okaaaay.

I’ve never been the confrontational type. But I *did* grow up with the queen of slaying petty bullshit herself, Milena, so I can spot it a mile away.

But *jeez*. What’s this girl’s problem?

“Evelina,” I smile politely, holding my hand out. “Or just plain Evie.”

She ignores the hand. “Plain is certainly a word.”

Okay, what the *hell*?

I keep smiling as charmingly as I can. “I don’t think we’ve met?”

“We haven’t.”

The girl picks up her phone and ignores me as she types out a quick text. The phone's in an elegant, lux-looking case. But it’s also got the “Hot Wheels” toy car logo engraved into the back, below a silhouette image of a wheelchair.

I laugh. “Love the phone case.”

“Yeah, I got it specifically to amuse girls I don’t know,” she drones. “Mission accomplished.”

My brow furrows. “I’m sorry, did I do something wrong?”

Her lips twist as she puts the phone back in her lap and looks up at me. “Don’t you know it’s rude to stand while you're talking to someone in a wheelchair? You’re supposed to be at my level. Way to lord your ableist privilege over me.”

I blink quickly. “Oh, God, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.” I smile at her as I awkwardly squat down next to her, trying to make sure my scandalously short dress doesn’t ride up over my butt.

She eyes me coolly. “I’m Sabine.”

I smile. “And you’re with the Syndicate?”

“Inner circle,” she says with a look that could freeze Florida. “Vaughn and I go *way* back.”

“Yeah?” I smile. “How do you two know—”

“I hear you used to date Andrés Torvallés.”

I stiffen.

“W-what?”

“Andrés. Someone said you used to fuck him.”

I shake my head, frowning. “Oh, no, definitely not. I teach a dance class at Knightsblood University, and he’s on the board.”

“*Was* on the board,” Sabine says flatly. “Being dead has a way of relieving you of those sorts of duties.”

God, why is she being such a *bitch*?

“True,” I say with a nervous laugh. “But, no, he and I never dated. We just—”

“You know, his dad killed mine.”

I stiffen, my jaw dropping. “Oh my God,” I breathe, “I’m *so* sorry—”

“Fucker put me in this chair at the same time,” she adds with a harsh edge to her tone.

I nod slowly. “That’s…terrible. I’m so sorry. But I really didn’t ever date Andrés. We were barely acquaintances.”

Is *that* why she’s got it in for me?

Sabine eyes me for another few long seconds. Then slowly, she smiles.

“Sorry,” she sighs. “I get all alpha about Vaughn. He’s like family to me.”

I exhale in relief. “Please don’t worry about it.” I grin. “I’ve got an older brother, and I’ve spent *so much* time chasing girls away from him.” I giggle. “It turned out to be a wasted effort. He’s gay anyway.” I lower my voice. “Also, Vaughn and I…we’re not like a *thing*.” I lean closer. “He’s, uh…my Adept.”

Sabine smiles and then turns to signal a server walking past us with a tray of champagne. He bends down so she can pluck two flutes off it. Then she turns back to me. “Can we start over?”

I exhale again, grinning. “I’d love to.”

“Great.”

She hands me my glass, which has a little candy bubbling and fizzing in the bottom of it.

“It’s supposed to mineralize the grapes or…some shit,” Sabine grins, rolling her eyes. “I dunno. Vaughn's a wine nerd. He says it’s supposed to make great champagne taste even better.”

“Well, who can argue with that,” I smile. We clink our glasses, and I take a sip.

“Well,” Sabine sighs. “I should go mingle. But I’m glad we talked, Evelina.”

“Oh, Evie is fine, really,” I smile back. “I’m glad we talked, too.”

She winks and start to maneuver her chair around. “Oh, and Evie?” Sabine glances over her shoulder at me. “You don’t actually have to squat around people in wheelchairs. I was just making that up to be a cunt.”

She laughs as she rolls away.

Note to self: don’t get on her bad side. I mean, *Jeez.*

I walk through the crowd, sipping my champagne. There’s no sign of Gabby. But when I see Carson standing alone on the large terrace outside, I figure it's my chance to perhaps get anything more concrete from him.

“Great view, huh?”

He turns to glare at me over his shoulder, and I hug myself against the sudden chill that ripples through me as I step out onto the empty terrace.

“Well well well,” Carson murmurs. “What do we have here?”

I smile weakly. “I’m not sure we met at the last party.” I stick out my hand as I walk over. “I’m Evelina. Nikitin.”

He snorts. “I know who you are. Just like you know who I am. Let’s skip the polite banter, shall we?” he growls.

Okay, obviously he’s in a foul mood. But maybe that means I can pry more out of him if I’m delicate about it.

“So—”

“Where’d your little friend go,” Carson interrupts, his voice sharp.

I frown. “Little friend?”

“*Gabriella*.”

“Oh!” I turn to glance back at the party through the floor to ceiling windows. “I…don’t actually know?”

“Join the club,” he grunts, standing up from where he’s been leaning on the railing. “Anyway, *great talk*, distraction.”

My brow furrows. “Distraction?”

He smirks. “It would seem you’ve captured Bancroft's attention,” he grunts.

I start to smile as my face heats.

Carson laughs mirthlessly. “*Not* necessarily a good thing, FYI.” He starts to walk past me back to the party. “So good luck with that.”

Shoot shoot shoot.

I need more information.

“Hey…” I clear my throat. “I heard that jerk Anderson talking about your mom.”

Carson's broad shoulders tighten, and I shiver when he turns to look at me.

“The *fuck* did you just say?”

I gasp quietly, edging away from him as he advances on me. My back hits the terrace railing, and I shiver when an electric zap flies over my skin.

What the heck was *that*?

I can't dwell on it. Carson’s looming right in front of me, caging me in as he grips the railing.

“Something you’d care to add about her?” he hisses.

“No!” I blurt. “Not at all! God, I’m sorry, that came out wrong. I just meant screw him. Anderson, that is. Not God.” I laugh weakly.

Carson presses a little closer to me, and that same electric sensation flickers over my skin, taking my breath away.

“My own mother…” I frown. “She died when I was young. People used to tease me about it sometimes in school, and it hurt. A lot.” I smile wryly at him. “I'm just saying, I get moms being a hot button.”

“Unfortunately,” he growls, “*my* mom is still alive.” He smiles at the shocked look on my face. “*And* a giant cunt.” His gaze stabs into me, and for a second, I remember his conversation with Gideon about throwing someone off a roof.

And here I am, alone with him on the terrace, what feels like a mile above the city below.

Suddenly, he exhales slowly and shakes his head, and the tension drains from my neck as he backs away, giving me a little more space.

“Sorry,” he grunts, flashing a quick grin. “Like you said, it’s a hot button. Cunt or not, she’s still my mom…unfortunately. Want to sit?” Carson gestures to a small outdoor couch covered in cushions.

I smile a little and nod as relief floods through me. “Sure.”

When we sit, that same freaky feeling zings through me, even more pronounced as I sink into the cushions.

God, they’re *heavenly*. It's the most magical, amazing, maybe even sensual sensation I’ve ever felt on my skin. I smile widely as I snuggle back into the cushions with a low moan.

Carson frowns. “You okay?”

“What? Yeah,” I smile. “Sorry, I guess I just *really* needed to sit.”

He nods and takes a sip of what looks like whiskey in his glass. “I apologize for before,” he grunts. “My mom is just a sore subject.”

“And your dad?”

It tumbles out before I can stop it. I’m too busy noticing how *amazing* the cushions feel under my thighs and palms to have any control over my mouth.

I wince.

“Sorry, that’s none of my—”

“So you *were* eavesdropping on Wick and me at the bar.”

I nod nervously. “A little, maybe. Sorry, I really wasn’t trying to.” I frown. “So, wow, your dad might not be your dad?”

Shut. The. Hell. Up. Self.

Carson smirks. “Holy shit, you must be keeping him on his toes.”

My brow knits. “Your dad?”

“*Vaughn*,” he growls. “And…yeah… My dad probably isn’t my dad.”

Holy crap.

My pulse quickens, feeling like pure, hot joy as it flows through my veins.

Am I seriously about to solve the mystery for Diego? Is Carson possibly his bastard heir? My palms slide from the cushions up over my bare thighs, and I bite back a gasp at the orgasmic sensation that ripples through my body.

I take another big sip of my champagne. The little mineral thing at the bottom has mostly dissolved by now, so the glass isn’t bubbling like it was before. But it still tastes *delicious*. And the bubbles feel *so good* on my tongue.

“Anyway.” Carson makes like he’s about to stand. “My regards to Vaughn.”

“Wait!”

My hand shoots out to grab his sleeve. I can’t let him leave yet. I need to dig a little deeper and see if this crazy theory has legs. Does he know the Torvallés family? Does his *mother*?

But when I dart my hand out, it’s his whole, muscled forearm that I grab, not just fabric. Carson arches a brow, glancing to where I’m grabbing his arm. His eyes lift to mine, a spark flickering in them.

“And why should I wait?”

I squirm against the cushions, feeling warm and tingly and breathless. I know somewhere in the back of my mind that I should let go of his arm because I’m being super weird. But I just *can’t*. The fabric of his jacket sleeve feels too good. The muscles of his forearm under it ripple again, making my arm tingle.

Warmth pools in my core as I grip his arm a little tighter.

What the *hell* is wrong with me?

“Be…because…” I mumble. My dress suddenly feels both too heavy and like pure magic on my body. Every beat of my pulse has the material teasing against my skin. Every time I squirm on the cushions it ignites a fire across my body.

“Because you make me curious,” I blurt.

God, is that me trying to be seductive? Is *this* how I try to glean information?

“*Do I*.”

Carson's tone is both sensual and venomous as he leans closer. His eyes glint wickedly, slicing into me.

“*Yeah*…” I mumble, feeling melty and *sooo good*. I have zero desire to keep on touching him, but for the life of me I'm unable to let go of his arm. My grip tightens, like I can’t get enough of the rippling forearm beneath the jacket sleeve. My fingertips glide over the fabric, greedy for the electric sensations it sends through my veins fireworks. It’s not even a *him* thing. It’s just that his jacket feels *so* freaking good to touch.

Carson eyes me coolly, the light breeze blowing his blond hair back from his gorgeous face.

“Wanna know a secret?” I giggle.

“Absolutely,” he growls. He’s typing something on his phone. But before the annoyance of that can screw with the floaty, happy sensation buzzing through me, he sets it back down.

“Vaughn and Val have the *same butt*.”

I explode in giggles, my face hot as I cover my mouth with one hand.

“Fascinating,” Carson smirks, blandly amused.

“They're cute butts, too,” I snort, giggling as I drop my forehead to his shoulder. “Oh. You’ve got *really* strong arms, by the way.”

That’s when I feel a change in the wind. A chill to the air. A dark force, pulsing against my back, like Darth freaking Vader just made his entrance.

I slowly lift my forehead from Carson's shoulder and unwrap my arms from around his bicep.

When did I start hugging his arm?

Slowly, haltingly, I turn my head.

Icy blue cuts *viciously* into me. My chest tightens as my pulse spikes. The throbbing, electric sensations rippling over my skin turn cold.

Vaughn does not look happy.

At all.

"W-w-what are you doing here?" I blurt, the color draining from my face.

"I texted him to come *collect you*," Carson sighs in a bored tone as he shakes me off and then leans in close. "Were you trying to make him jealous with your clumsy attempts to flirt with me?"

My stomach knots, my mind still foggy. "What?! No, I—"

"Tsk *tsk*, princess." Carson smiles maliciously at me and then lifts his eyes to the god of wrath himself standing a few feet away, whose gaze is burning holes into my soul. "I think you may have gotten yourself into a *world* of hurt."

I'm vaguely aware of pouting like a child when Carson moves away from me, because the heat of his body felt *so good* against my arm. And even after he walks over to Vaughn, claps a hand on his shoulder, and leans in to murmur a few words to him, my whole body is still buzzing, warm, and tingling everywhere.

I shift on the couch and literally have to bite my lip to stop from *moaning*. God, my clothes feel so fucking good. The dress teases and brushes sensually over every inch of my skin. I shift again and gasp quietly as the material glides over my electrified nipples, sending a zap of hot need between my thighs.

I jolt when Vaughn squats down in front of me, filling my field of vision. A whimper bubbles from my throat when he grabs my jaw tightly, glaring into

my face. My eyes dart past him, and I shiver when I realize Carson has gone.

We're alone.

Gabby's dress feels *so freaking good* against my skin. The couch is melting around me. His hand—my *God*—feels like pure sin as he cups my face.

"I'm only going to ask this once," he growls. "What—and I can't stress this enough—*the fuck* did you think you were doing, coming to this party—"

"Just because you didn't invite me, it doesn't mean I'm not invited."

Wait, that makes sense, right?

"That is *exactly* what it means," he growls. "You're *my* Acolyte, and *I* didn't invite you."

"Well, that was a jerk thing to do," I say snippily. "And like you *just said*, I'm your Acolyte. I'm still *in* all of this, and I haven't said my safe—"

"I should punish you for walking into this place wearing *that* dress," he hisses. "Not to mention your sad attempt to make me jealous by flirting with my friend."

I roll my eyes dramatically. "Oh my *God*, get over yourself. A, I can wear whatever I want. B, I wasn't *flirting* with Carson, Jesus. C, control issues much?"

Part of me is aware how *insane* it is to be talking to him like this. But that part seems to be quite comfortable sitting in the passenger seat and letting the other part drive.

Vaughn's jaw clenches. "Are you done?"

"Nope!" I smile at him, rolling my hips and trying not to moan at the amazing sensations rippling over my skin as my bare thighs rub against the cushions.

I eye him accusatively and stab a finger at him. "You wanna give me shit for coming to a party? How about *you*, sneaking into my room at night to

undress me and touch me and *come* on me while I sleep?" My finger jabs again. "*Pervert*."

Vaughn's eyes burn into me. "Are you drunk?"

I sigh dramatically. "*No*. I only had one." I lift the almost empty champagne flute, the remnants of the little mineral thingy sitting inert at the bottom of it. "I mean, I *do* get drunk easily," I giggle, shrugging and then gasping when the movement pulls the top of my dress across my nipples. "But I'm not *drunk*—"

"You're high."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, *Dad*," I snicker. "I'm *not*. I never take drugs—"

"It's not an accusation," he growls, taking the champagne flute from my hand and glaring at it. "It's a fact. You drank this?"

I squirm again, grinding my ass on the couch and gasping as the pleasure sparks over every inch of my skin. "*Mmm-hmm*," I moan. "Just *onnnne*, though—"

"You're on strong Ecstasy."

"Wait…*what*?" I blurt.

I gasp as he quickly stands, grabs my hands, and hauls me to my feet. "You're high as a fucking kite, and you're coming with me," he growls.

I groan, my face scrunching up as I pull my wrists from his grasp. "Wait wait wait," I mumble. "I don't take drugs…"

"Well, you just did," he mutters. "And now you're coming with me."

I snort out a silly laugh as I find myself sinking against his chest. My cheek feels electric as I rub it against his suit jacket, and my fingertips tingle as I slide my hands up and down his rock-hard abdomen.

"I'm *nooooot*," I giggle. "I'm staying *riiiight heeeeree*—HEY!"

My entire body jolts as Vaughn grabs me by the waist, lifts me effortlessly, and drapes me face-down over his shoulder.

“Time to go, *princess*.”

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21

EVELINA

PART of me knows I should be mortified, being carried out of the party over his shoulder like a sack of laundry. But that part of me is buried under the overwhelming, *achingly* erotic feel of his shoulder grinding against my middle.

Of his firm hands on my body, the sheer electricity of the pressure sending sparks over my skin.

Even the blood rushing to my head as I lie sprawled over his shoulder feels *so* freaking good. My thighs squeeze and rub together as he carries me into the elevator and hits one of the buttons.

I've never done drugs before. I've never even smoked pot. I mean, when one glass of wine gets you loopy, there's no need for anything stronger.

But right now, he's right. It's *abundantly* clear that I am high.

And high feels *good*.

It feels *great*, actually. So much so that I completely understand now why people do drugs. The sensations rippling over and through my body are *incredible.*

"And just *where* do you think you're taking me," I giggle, trying not to moan as my body shamelessly grinds against his rock-hard muscles.

I can't help it. I literally *cannot*. It's like my brain is incapable of wrenching control back from my body, which is entirely focused on keeping those

delicious toe-curling physical sensations going.

“Stop it,” he growls. His grip on the backs of my thighs and my ass tightens, and I can’t help but moan again.

“Or *what*,” I purr.

“Don’t fucking tempt me, Evelina,” Vaughn murmurs darkly as the elevator doors ding open to the lobby of the building.

“*Uh oh*,” I giggle. “I might *beg*…” I squirm against him. “And I know that makes you *haaarrdd*…”

“Now would be the perfect time to *shut the fuck up*, princess,” Vaughn hisses dangerously as he marches through the lobby to the glass doors leading outside.

I snort. “You wouldn’t do anything to me. I’m on *druuuugs*,” I giggle.

Suddenly, I’m gasping as he yanks me off his shoulder, sets my feet on the ground, and slams me up against a sleek, blacked-out Mercedes G-wagon.

“*That’s what you think*,” he murmurs darkly before opening the passenger door and literally lifting me into the seat.

I’m staring at him, my jaw agape and my eyes wide as he buckles me in and then storms around to the driver's side.

Then the SUV rumbles to life, and I am *incapable* of thinking, or speaking, or doing anything but *melting* into the passenger seat.

Every rev of the engine. Every bump in the road. Every brake for a light. They all send shudders of arousal coiling through my core. It feels like my skin is on fire as a tingling sensation sparks over every inch of it, until my nipples are tight and aching in my dress and my panties are just a wet strip of fabric rubbing deliciously against my dripping pussy.

Neon lights zigzag past the windows in a blur. The leather seat presses against my bare back, my ass, and the backs of my thighs, making my breath catch. Deep, hypnotic trance music plays through the speakers, and *oh my God*, it’s like I can feel the freaking music as it tickles my skin and dances up my neck to my ears.

The car hits another bump, sending a bolt of pleasure stabbing through me. I moan as I grind against the seat. I bite down on my lip, my face burning as I squeeze my thighs tighter together, desperate for the rumble of the engine making my panties rub against my clit.

Without warning, Vaughn reaches over, grabs the front of my dress, and yanks the cowl neck to the side. I gasp sharply, whimpering as my left breast is bared, my nipple tight and tingling as the air teases over it. He shoves the other part of the cowl neck off my other breast, leaving me topless and shuddering with heat, my eyes wide as I turn to stare at him.

His gorgeous face stays looking straight ahead, his chiseled jaw clenching and his haunted, icy eyes glinting like blue steel. I moan when he suddenly pinches a nipple, twisting viciously. I cry out, choking as he squeezes harder, tugging at the throbbing pink bud until I'm shaking and grinding against the seat.

I want to tell myself it's the Ecstasy. That *drugs* are the reason my body is responding so eagerly and desperately to his brutal touch.

But it's not.

It's *me*.

Or him.

Or maybe it's *us*, together.

I don't fight or protest when Vaughn's hand drops to my thigh and yanks my dress up past my panties. Instead, I shudder and moan when he brutally slaps my thighs apart, spreading my legs and suddenly cupping my soaked panties with his hand. His thick finger slips underneath them, making me whimper as I grind my pussy against the backs of his fingers. He yanks hard, ripping the lace away with a shredding sound that echoes in the G-Wagon and sends a bolt of violent need through my core.

When his hand leaves my thighs, I squeeze them together as the engine revs.

"Don't you fucking dare close your legs, princess."

His dark voice slices through the heat of the SUV.

“If you need to make that slutty pussy feel good, spread your legs and use your fingers like a good little whore.”

My core *ignites* with liquid fire as I stare at him, my eyes bulging.

Vaughn just keeps driving, eyes on the road as he brings my ruined, torn panties to his face and inhales slowly.

“I said *touch your slutty cunt*, princess.”

It’s embarrassing how quickly my hand dives between my legs. How loudly I moan when my fingers glide between my slick, eager lips.

I start rubbing my clit in slow circles, my eyes rolling back and my ass writhing. The drugs are in total control now. And I know that adds a seriously screwed-up power element to all this: I’m *on Ecstasy.* He’s sober.

I’m at his mercy.

I wouldn’t be able to do a damn thing if he stopped the car, bent me over it in the middle of Midtown Manhattan, and fucked me however he wanted.

What’s *even more* screwed up is how turned on the idea makes me.

My hips grind. My moans are loud and unapologetic as I rub my clit and squirm in pleasure in the seat next to him.

The vehicle comes to a sudden stop.

Noooo.

I whine in protest, still touching myself as I swivel my head to look at him. Vaughn’s watching me with predatory focus, his eyes glinting as I look right back, eagerly rubbing my pussy.

I’m close. So close that I don’t even stop as he gets out of the car and comes back around to my side. It’s only when he wrenches the door open and grabs me that I pull my hand away, shrieking as he tosses me over his shoulder again.

I’m *hyper* aware of the fact that I’m not wearing panties anymore as he storms into the building and then an elevator, my bare tits pressing against the fabric of his suit, electrifying my nipples. He yanks my dress up once the doors close, and I cry out when two of his fingers plunge into me from behind, roughly fingering my slick, soaking pussy as the elevator ascends.

The doors open to darkness, and my heart skips.

Vaughn’s fingers slip from my pussy, and a deep somberness drapes over everything as he steps out of the elevator into the near pitch-dark penthouse.

“W-what…” I gulp as he sets me down barefoot on the floor.

Where the fuck did my heels go?

“Why are we here?” I whisper, shaking.

“I can take care of you here.”

My jaw tightens. “I don’t need to be *babied*—”

“Oh, I’m not going to baby you, princess,” he murmurs. “I’m going to *fuck you*.”

My pulse is roaring in my ears, my face on fire and my skin tingling as he turns to face me in the gloom.

“Yes, you’re high. But if you think that’s going to stop me, you’re *very* fucking wrong,” he growls. “If you came to me thinking you’d find a gentleman—”

“*I’d never think that*,” I breathe, my voice shaking as my body shivers and coils with anticipation.

Vaughn takes a slow breath. He shrugs off his jacket, folding it and placing it on a table by the elevator doors. He loosens his tie and slips it off before rolling the sleeves of his dress shirt up over his muscled, tattooed forearms.

Fire crackles inside me.

“You get a five second head start.”

My pulse spikes as my head whips around to stare at him. “Head start?”

“Five seconds, Evelina.”

“It’s… It’s pitch black in here,” I blurt, my pulse spiking erratically as my body trembles with fear, excitement, chemicals, and adrenaline. I turn to glance up at him. “If…if you catch me—”

“*When* I catch you, I’m going to fucking destroy you,” he purrs darkly, his voice eerily devoid of emotion. “I’m going to *break* that slutty cunt. One.”

Oh my God.

“Two.”

I bolt into the darkness, with no idea where I’m going or what the *hell* I’m doing.

“Three.”

My hip bashes into the back corner of…maybe a couch? I scream in agony as I bounce away from it and crash to the floor, my heartbeat thundering in my ears as fire ripples over my skin.

“*Four*.”

Holy shit.

I scramble to my feet and lurch in a random direction, my arms thrust in front of me, my body clenching and tightening as seductive heat coils through my center.

“*Five*.”

There’s nothing else. No final line promising to hunt me. Just the last number, a moment of silence, and then *footsteps* thundering through the darkness.

…Right in my direction.

My throat is so tight I can’t even scream. Maybe it’s fear, or maybe it's the drugs coursing through my veins, heightening every sensation until it feels like the air itself is turning me on.

This is *wildly* unfair.

Not just because he knows the layout of this place. But because every step, every heartbeat, every jangle of my nerves is dumping pure pleasure into my veins.

Every brush against a piece of furniture sends a ripple of desire teasing through my system. Every jolt as my bare feet pound against wooden floors or carpeting makes need pulse desperately between my thighs.

The screaming anticipation of his hands grabbing me from the darkness throbs harder through my body, obliterating everything in its path until it's all too much.

My nerves give out and I crash panting to a stop against the padded arm of a leather chair.

"*You win*!" I blurt into the darkness, my heart pounding against my ribs as sweat clings to the small of my back. "*I give up!*" I'm breathless, shaking all over as the drugs fucking with my brain chemistry ignite in my veins. "*Whatever you're going to do, just do it—*"

"*Gladly*."

I *scream* as a fist roughly grabs my hair and yanks me back. Hands paw at my dress, ripping it off me as I go crashing to the ground. My skin erupts in blinking neon fire as I claw at the floor, yelling as his fingers rake over my skin.

Slapping.

Pinching.

Mauling.

The darkness, the heat, the unhinged violence, the adrenaline, the drugs…it all swirls around me like black ink, dragging me down into the depths of this madness.

The insanity that I crave.

The hurt that I want.

The submission and humiliation that I *need*.

I moan when he slams me down on my back and straddles my chest, his muscled thighs pressing into my ribs. Through the hazy blur of my high, I realize he's as naked as I am, which sends a vicious ripple up my spine.

I whimper when his hand grabs my jaw and tugs my mouth open, his thumb dragging over my panting lips before something slaps heavily against my mouth.

Holy *hell*.

He just slapped my face *with his cock.*

Vaughn grunts and does it again, slapping the swollen, leaking head of his big dick against my lips, my tongue, my chin and my cheeks, groaning deeply as he smears precum all over my face. His hand forces my jaw open as I moan eagerly.

"*Open wide, princess*."

Just as I obey, stinging fire explodes between my legs.

Good God, he just slapped my fucking PUSSY.

He does it again and again, until the fiery pain melts into something so achy, needy, and deliciously unhinged that it takes my breath away.

Oh my God.

OH MY GOD.

He slaps my pussy again and suddenly rams two fingers inside me, stroking them against that spot inside.

I come *instantly*.

Violently.

Wetly.

An inhuman scream rips from my throat and my hips lift off the ground as I feel warm liquid spray over my thighs and his hand.

What the HELL was that?!

Vaughn groans deeply, his fingers still thrusting in and out of my slick pussy as sloppy wet sounds fill the apartment.

“What a greedy little slut, squirting all over my fingers like a whore.”

I cry out in pleasure as he slaps my pussy again and sinks his fingers back into me, ramming them in and out as my body jerks again, my heels scuffing on the floor as my eyes roll back.

“Now open that pretty mouth, princess,” he rasps, his voice like death, “and show me how a good little slut swallows a big, fat cock.”

I’ve barely parted my lips before he grabs a fistful of my hair and shoves his swollen dick between them. A raw moan hums in my chest as he thrusts roughly into the back of my throat, gagging me, making me squirm and kick against the ground as drool trickles from the corners of my mouth.

His fingers ram into me, the squelching wet sounds of my desperate need for him mingling with the sloppy sounds of his cock fucking my throat.

I gasp, panting when he pulls back and then slaps the heavy, wet head of his cock against my lips, smearing them with spit and precum.

Suddenly, he’s flipping me over.

He grabs my hips and lifts my ass as he wraps my hair in a fist and pins my cheek to the ground.

Oh God. Oh God. OH GOD.

The Ecstasy and my adrenaline ignite like gasoline through my veins as he slaps my ass and eases the fat head of his cock against my slick pussy lips.

“The next time you try to get my attention by flirting with my fucking friends…” he rasps into my ear, reaching underneath me to pinch a nipple. I moan, shaking all over, my skin on *fire* as I pant heavily against the floor.

I sob in pleasure as his hand crashes roughly to my butt, spanking me hard.

“*I’ll fuck your ass raw in front of them*, so they know exactly what a broken slut you are for me.”

When he rams every thick inch of his monster cock inside me with one thrust, because I'm *so fucking wet*, it truly clicks for me.

I've wondered about it before. I've mulled over what it means.

But it's that violent, consuming, dominating moment of sudden penetration that gives me my answer.

I don't just *like* the rough way he fucks me. I don't just *enjoy* the crude, filthy things he says. I don't just *get off* on the submission.

When he fucks me like this, or talks to me like that, or inflicts pain and humiliation on me, I don't feel used or degraded, I feel *needed*.

When I drop into this space with him and give him total control, it's as if the subjugation and viciousness strip away all complexity.

It's not about being impressive, or perfectly polished. It simply boils down to being *wanted*, in its purest form.

And God help me, that might be the biggest rush of my life.

My drug of choice.

My everything.

When he fucks the shit out of me, his grooved hips and abs slapping against my ass, I'm not "giving in".

I'm letting go.

When he grabs my hair in a fist or pinches my nipples or slaps my face or shoves his fingers into my greedy mouth, he's not humiliating me.

He's setting me free.

He's allowing me to come undone.

To shatter.

To fall.

And the single most fucked-up part of all of this is that when Vaughn Bancroft is chasing me through the dark, or hurting me, or fucking me into

submission, I trust him more than I've ever trusted anyone in my life.

I let go.

I detach.

That's why I allow myself to sink into the dark place we create together.

I cry out when he pushes a wet finger against my asshole, squirming and struggling and then gasping when his finger finally sinks into me. I moan when he fucks me harder into the floor, and pulls my hair rougher, and pushes a second finger into my ass.

Drugs or not, it's like being completely reborn.

"*Be a good girl and break for me, princess. Let me feel your slutty little holes come for me. Fucking shatter for me.*"

The world goes still. The roaring in my ears thins to a high whine. My heart stops and my lungs tighten.

He pushes two fingers from his other hand into my mouth. And suddenly, with my mouth, my pussy and my ass filled with him, I'm gone.

Shattering into a million fucking pieces.

The orgasm thunders through me like a tsunami, sweeping me away and dragging me under as I drown in the delicious release. Vaughn roars, ramming his huge cock into me as I feel him tense up and then start pulsing deep inside. I cry out when I feel his hot cum spill deep into my pussy, then he pulls out and sprays the rest over my ass, my pussy, my back, and my thighs.

Reality has no meaning. The world is blurred and swimmy.

I'm still shaking as he wraps me in his arms, cradles me against his body, and starts to carry me, my head lolled against his chest, listening to the steady thud of his heart.

"*Such a good girl*," he murmurs against my ear. "*MY good girl*."

* * *

MY BROW FURROWS DEEPLY, my eyes squeezing shut against the harsh light trying to pry its way into my head.

I groan as I shift under the covers, pouting as sleep is stripped away from me by consciousness.

Dammit.

I exhale with a huff, wincing again at the light piercing through my eyelids before I slowly open them.

My heart skips for a second. I have *no idea* where I am.

The bedroom is spotless and gorgeously decorated, but it's totally unfamiliar. I begin to sit up, then realize with a start that I'm *naked* under the covers.

What the…

I stiffen, my head throbbing. Then gradually the gauzy fog of sleep fades, and it all starts to come back to me.

Oh God.

The mad chase through the dark.

The rough, punishing, brutal fucking.

The slaps, pinches, chokes, and fingers pushing into my *ass*.

Heat floods my core as I curl under the covers, now *very* awake.

…And maybe a little wet.

My head throbs again, and I wince as *that* part comes rushing back.

Good lord, I took drugs last night. Not even something normal like weed, either. I did *Ecstasy*.

Then, slowly, my brows pinch as my memories continue to come back, replaying the flute of champagne with the little "candy" bubbling at the bottom of it.

Sabine.

It all comes back to me. I realize with horrifying clarity that I didn't "take" Ecstasy last night.

I was *given it*, without my freaking consent.

"*That bitch*!" I blurt out loud.

"Who's a bitch?"

I whip my head around and feel myself blush when I see Vaughn standing in the open doorway of what must be a guest room at his penthouse.

I try to swallow back some of the heat as I pull the covers tighter around me.

"Nothing," I blurt. "I mean…no one."

Vaughn arches a brow, his gaze dropping to the white-knuckle grip I have on the duvet covering my nudity.

"Your sudden bout of modesty is…*interesting*, given last night."

My face heats. "I was…" I groan and look down. "The Ecstasy…" I slowly lift my eyes to his. "You…" I frown. "You knew I'd been drugged, and you still—"

"*Careful*, princess," Vaughn murmurs darkly as he walks slowly over to the bed, making my pulse skip and my thighs clench. "Might I remind you of our deal?"

I nod mutely.

"Say it out loud," he rumbles, a dark glint in his eyes.

I swallow.

"Me not saying my word is implied consent," I mumble, shivering.

Vaughn's gaze is steady. "And is there anything you'd like to say right now?"

My mouth twists as another blush creeps over my face. I shake my head.

"Use your words, Evelina," he says sternly.

Dammit. Why the hell is that authoritative tone so hot?

My lip catches between my teeth. “No,” I say quietly. “There’s nothing.”

“No *specific* word?” he says with a devilish grin. It both annoys me and makes me bite my lip while trying not to squirm.

I shake my head again, smiling through my caught lower lip. “*No*,” I whisper.

Vaughn nods as he looms over me. He leans down and cups my jaw.

“*That’s my good girl*,” he murmurs.

Fuck.

I remember the rules. But when he’s *this* close, and saying things like *that* after what happened last night?

I’m going to break one.

I grab his face, and before he can stop me, I close the distance between us and *kiss him*.

And *oh my God*, have I wanted to do this. I don’t even think I realized how badly *not* kissing him was getting to me before just now. But when our lips sear together, and that spark ignites in my chest, I don’t think there’s anything I want to do *more* than kiss him.

I melt against his mouth, whimpering…

…Until his hand wraps around my throat like iron.

He shoves me toppling back into the bedsheets, making my breath catch sharply and fear curdle in my chest as his cold eyes stab lethally into me.

“Wait, Vaughn, I—”

I whimper, trembling as his hand tightens, pinning me against the sheets as he looms over me with venom in his eyes.

“There’s a reason you woke up in a guest bedroom and not mine.”

His voice hits like a cold slap.

“There are fucking *rules*, Evelina,” he hisses. “You know that.”

He abruptly lets go of my throat and steps away.

“Break them again, and this is *done*.”

His eyes narrow, and I break a little when he turns and walks toward the door.

“There are clothes for you on the chair by the window. Get dressed. Someone will be coming to take you home in five minutes.”

Then he leaves.

And I hate…absolutely *hate*…how much it hurts.

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22

DEMON

"YOU'RE PATHETIC."

We stay silent as his icy voice wraps around our neck and squeezes.

"*Weak*."

Our hands twitch at our sides. Quentin laughs quietly.

"Does that make you angry, boy?"

We say nothing. The silence ticks by.

Suddenly, pain explodes through our face as our head snaps to the side.

"I *asked you a goddamn question*," Quentin barks.

"*No, grandfather*," we snarl. That's what he wants to hear.

Quentin sighs, then chuckles to himself. "I see. So now we're lying, are we?"

We clench our teeth tightly, pain lancing through our jaw.

He sighs again as he walks over to stand in front of us. We brace ourselves when he raises his hand. It merely lands gently on our shoulder as his eyes stab into ours.

"You know I don't say these things to bring you down, Vaughn."

We nod.

“Pain…and resistance against that pain…is what breeds power.”

We nod again.

“I know my methods can hurt,” Quentin says quietly. “But it is those methods that got you to the top. Got you the throne that you were born to sit on.”

We nod slowly. “Yes. We understa—”

Fuck.

Our mouth snaps shut.

Too late.

Quentin’s eyes darken as he peers at us, then he exhales slowly, his gaze turning cold.

“*We*,” he growls.

“Grandfather—”

“*We*?!” he snarls, a little louder now. Then he barks a cold laugh as he turns, shaking his head. “So it’s back to that nonsense now.”

It was never *away* from “that nonsense”. But we know how much he hates the *us*, so we usually mask it around him.

“Who is it today, Grandson?” he snarls, whirling on us. “Which of your unbridled psychoses and fucking *weaknesses* am I forced to humor today, hmm?”

Our gaze stays locked straight ahead as he slowly circles around us.

The blow comes without warning, fire exploding across our back, making us hiss and clench our teeth tightly as our spine snaps tight.

“Well?!” Quentin snarls. “Is it *the demon*?” he barks with a mirthless laugh. “Or one of your other fabrications.”

“Grandfather—”

The pain comes again, making us hiss viciously through clenched teeth.

“*Yes, Demon,*” we snarl.

Quentin laughs coldly. “Jesus H. Christ,” he exhales as he walks back around to our front, twirling the leather riding crop in his hand. “The demon without claws, it appears. The demon who still needs *me* to *GET THINGS DONE*!”

We roar in pain as the crop slashes across our chest, then the backs of our arms when we raise them to shield our face.

He stops after a dozen or so strokes, panting as he backs away.

“I made you what you are, boy.”

We nod.

“I know,” we say quietly, swallowing bile as our skin screams in agony.

He turns to face me, the crop at his side.

“Lose the girl,” he murmurs. “She’s a distraction from my goals.”

We nod and look down at the floor.

This is how it always is with Quentin. He’s the one piece of us that refuses to be like the others.

To embrace the *we*.

We flinch when he taps the tip of the crop on our chest.

“She’s already too close.”

He drags the crop up to our chin, lifting it with the little strip of leather.

“And for that sin, there must be atonement. Without pain, there is no success.”

He pats our hand.

“You know what has to be done now,” he says gently.

Yes, we do.

We strip off our shirt and drop to our knees on the stone floor. Quentin quietly walks behind us, and we tense when the leather crop traces over old scars on our back.

“You realize I’m doing this for both of us, Grandson.”

“*I know*,” we choke.

“Count them.”

The first lash stings.

The second is like fire.

The third, and the two dozen that follow, are like razor blades flaying our skin open to the bone.

We keep counting.

We remain still.

We take it.

Because we deserve this.

We need this.

We are this.

And when it’s over, and we’re on our knees with blood trickling down our back and arms, our gaze falls to the riding crop gripped tightly in our fist.

She’s a bug in the system.

A flaw in the design.

A soft breeze, threatening to destroy the house of cards.

So why the *fuck* can’t we stay away from her?

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23

VAUGHN

WHEN SHE RISES up on the toes of one foot and kicks up her other leg toward the ceiling, my breath catches. My gaze cuts through the darkness of the theater, watching unblinkingly as her body spins effortlessly one hundred and eighty degrees as she moves her raised leg to the back before landing with the grace of a feather coming to rest.

Fuck.

She's good.

Ballet isn't exactly something I've spent time studying. I mean, yes, I've probably watched more performances than the average person. But that was from a distance, when I was keeping tabs on my brother while he was growing up, not even knowing I existed.

But those times that I'd watch Val, it wasn't so much because I wanted to watch *ballet* so much as it was that I wanted to watch *him*.

So even though I've seen maybe a hundred ballet performances over the last ten or twelve years, I still wouldn't claim to know a thing about it.

That said, I *have* seen enough to know that Evelina is fucking *incredible*.

Up on the stage of the Fonteyn Theater on the Knightsblood campus, Evelina smiles, a blush creeping up her neck as the younger dancers gush over the maneuver she just freaking *nailed*.

“Thanks,” Evelina grins, that blush still on her face. “Now, let’s break down the individual beats of Italian *fouetté à la seconde*.” She rolls her neck as she nods to the students lined up in front of her.

“So, that worked because I didn’t rush it. The standing leg does the work. Push down before you go up. If your plié is late, everything *after* it is late, too. Right?” She glances around the group, making sure they understand. “Don’t throw the leg. Place it. Let it arrive, *then* rotate. The turn only comes after you’re stable.” She grins. “Well, and in time with the music. Any questions?”

One girl raises her hand, and Evelina points to her.

“Yeah, I’m just wondering about how you get into the turn from the *développé*?”

“Ahh,” Evelina grins. “Yeah, that’s where *fouetté à la seconde* can get fucky.”

I can’t help but smile to myself in the shadows.

She swears now. And fuck if my dick doesn’t twitch, knowing he’s at least partly—okay, heavily—responsible for her slow, inevitable corruption.

Goddammit, I’ve missed her voice.

Far too much.

It’s now day five of Evelina going radio silent. No constant stream of texts with the energy level of a golden retriever puppy. No rambling, relentlessly bubbly voicemails.

No appearances at Syndicate events.

Nothing.

And it’s…bothersome how much that’s fucking with me.

I know it’s because I was a prick the other morning, after the night she mistakenly dosed herself with E—courtesy, I’m guessing, of the tablets Sebastian brought to the party.

A bold choice for a first-time foray into drugs, but after the night that followed, I'm not exactly complaining.

Should I feel I was in…I don't know…a *morally gray area* because I mixed my particular brand of sadism-sprinkled sex with a partner who was high as balls?

Maybe.

Probably.

But I don't.

And that's not a general lack of fucks to give about the concept of consent.

It's that when it comes to Evelina, *there is no line* I won't cross.

That's potentially a lot more problematic than I might care to admit. Because contrary to how it may appear when I'm with her, my life is *built* on lines.

Rules. Control. An unwavering, black or white view of the world. It's why I was such a dickhead the other morning.

It's not that I have an aversion to kissing *per se*. It's that there are fucking *rules* to this thing between us.

Break one, and the whole fucking thing descends into chaos. I can't have that.

But Evelina makes me want to break them. So I do.

Take right now, for example. I'm not on the Knightsblood campus today to sit in the shadows and watch Evelina dance. I'm here for my coronation, so to speak.

It's taken *months* of clawing, scheming, bribing, and placating, but finally, with Andrés Torvallés out of the way and no objections forthcoming from Cyril, my place on the board has been cemented. Today, that becomes official.

And yet, I'm not sitting in the Chancellor's office, chilling champagne and smugly waiting for my plans to come to fruition. I'm not sharing a cigar

with the guy and talking about my plans for the future of the university.

I'm *here*, hiding in the fucking shadows, watching Evelina Nikitin float across the stage.

Imagining her dropping obediently to her knees at my feet, her mouth open and a "please, Sir" on her lips.

Picturing her bending over for me and gasping as she counts aloud the spanks of my palm across her pink, brutalized ass.

Running from me, screaming with both fear and excitement.

Writhing and moaning and shattering for me as she takes every inch of my fucking cock in every one of her tight holes, begging for more until my cum is dripping down her thighs and her face.

I frown as I adjust the now-*massive* erection tenting my pants.

I'm not even thirty yet. But still. Popping boners while in the audience of college girls in tights and leotards is *never* a good look.

"Okay!"

Up on stage, Evelina claps her hands together twice, ripping my attention back to reality and away from the glorious mental images of stuffing her panties into her mouth and pinching her clit while I empty my balls up her ass.

Settle down.

Fucking make us, pussy.

I quietly clear my throat as I watch Evelina step to the front of the stage and turn to face her students.

"Guys, great work today. Seriously. Keep working on the idea of doing without thinking when it comes to that *fouetté à la seconde*. Remember, if you're counting down to it, you're going to miss it. It *has* to be anticipated. And if you have any questions, seriously, just text me, okay?"

Her students cluster around her, peppering her with questions, smiles and a few shy hugs before they trot away, leaving her alone on the stage.

Evelina's shoulders drop a little, like she's been performing an act and can finally be herself again now that the curtain is down. I watch as she stretches her arms above her head, then sprints across the stage and launches into a series of those *fouettés à la seconde* she was just teaching.

Fuck. *Me*.

She's amazing.

I watch as she spins again, her leg effortlessly kicking up toward the stage lights high above as she turns and turns and *turns* before coming to another graceful finish. Her small chest rises and falls, and she exhales heavily before rising up on her toes again with her back to me, giving me a lovely view of the tight globes of her ass, framed by her tights and leotard.

Evelina flinches when I start to clap from the back of the theater. She whirls, and I relish the way her face pales and then heats when she realizes who I am.

Her hands clench and unclench erratically at her sides, and her delicate throat bobs up and down as I calmly walk down the aisle toward her.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" she stammers as I come to a stop at the lip of the stage.

"Watching you."

Her face heats. "No… I mean, what are you doing here at Knightsblood?"

I cock a brow. "We just covered that."

Evelina's lip retreats between her teeth, and she crosses her arms. "I…"

"It is important that an Adept keep tabs on their Acolyte during the initiation period."

I say it with all the excitement of someone reciting from a textbook. Her mouth twists.

"I… I'm still your Acolyte?"

"Is there any reason you wouldn't be?"

Her brow knits. “I…I mean…we haven’t talked since the other—”

“Have you said your word?”

She squirms a little under my gaze, her teeth raking over her lip.

“*No*,” she says quietly.

“Then you’re still my Acolyte,” I murmur. I roll my neck and frown, pointing at the apron of the stage. “Sit.”

Evelina bristles, fire sparking in her gray eyes.

I exhale heavily. “*Please*. I’m not a fan of looking up to talk to you.”

She grins. “Well,” she blushes, her arms dropping to her sides as she pads to the front of the stage and sits on the edge, her legs dangling down. “Now you know how *I* feel.”

“I think we both know I’m *well* aware of how you *feel*,” I murmur, relishing the way her face turns bright red. She sucks in a breath as I move toward her, her petite frame shivering as my hands go to either side of her, caging her in.

“Did you really come all the way here to watch me dance?” she asks quietly.

“I’m actually on campus for a meeting,” I growl. “But yes, I’m *here*-here because I wanted to watch you dance.”

Her brow furrows. “But *why*?”

“Because you’re quite good.”

Evelina flushes. “*Thank you*,” she murmurs. “But I…I mean, so far, I only see you when we…” She looks down at her hands. “When we *have sex*,” she whispers.

“You mean when we *fuck*,” I growl. “Say it.”

She gasps quietly when I touch two fingers to her chin and lift her face to mine. She swallows, blushing to the roots of her hair.

“*When we fuck*,” she croaks, making my dick throb.

“Who’s to say that's not what I’m here for now?” I say darkly.

Her breath sucks in, eyes widening. “*Is it*?” she squeaks.

“That sounds suspiciously like a request, princess.”

She squirms, her face flushing even more as she tries to look away. My fingers tighten on her chin, forcing her to look right at me.

“Do you *want me* to be here for that?”

She shifts, still trying to avoid my gaze, her face pulsing with heat. Suddenly, she chokes out a sharp gasp as my other hand slips between her legs and cups her pussy through her leotard and tights.

“*Vaughn*,” she whimpers, her breath coming in short, staccato bursts as I start to rub her pussy through the fabric, feeling her get wetter and hotter.

“*Answer me*,” I growl, pressing my palm a little harder to the raw, slick heat radiating from her cunt.

“*Y-yes—*”

“There you are!”

God fucking dammit.

Evelina chokes on a gasp, her thighs clamping shut, trapping my hand between them. I turn to the sound of the voice and the auditorium door banging open, gritting my teeth when Evelina grabs my wrist and yanks my hand away.

Sabine wheels herself down the aisle toward us, with Ed Forbes and Madeline Brecht, two of the more prominent members of the board, walking close behind.

“We were at the boardroom ready to go,” Sabine smiles with her mouth, while her eyes narrow at me as if to say “and where the *fuck* were you?” But then her gaze shifts past me, and even that smile drops like a rock.

“Ed, Madeline,” I smile politely, “do you know Ms. Nikitin here? She’s been teaching some of the students in our dance program.”

Evelina hops down off the edge of the stage.

“Ahh, Roman’s sister, yes?” Ed beams, striding forward to shake her hand. “Always good to see our alumni assume their rightful thrones.”

Madeline takes Evelina’s outstretched hand next. “You’re with the Zakharova, aren’t you?” She smiles. “I saw your company’s production of *Swan Lake* a few months ago. Delightful. And Naomi Kim was a revelation.”

Eveline smiles widely, dipping her head. “Thank you. Truly.”

“I also remember watching you in particular, since your brother was such an impressive alumnus,” Madeline goes on. “Beautiful work.”

Evelina blushes deeply and thanks her again.

“Yes she’s *quite* talented,” I murmur, turning and locking my eyes on her.

Sabine loudly clears her throat. “Well, unfortunately, we *do* need to get to the boardroom. A few of the other members have packed schedules today,” she says crisply, shooting Evelina a dark look.

“Too true,” Ed sighs. “Well, Bancroft?” He claps me on the shoulder. “Shall we finally make things official after all these months?”

Truth be told, I’d much rather stay here, lay Evelina out on the stage with her head hanging over the edge of it, and fuck her throat until I come on her face.

Fucking do it. We can make them all watch…

Settle down.

I clear my throat and nod. “Of course. Lead the way, Ed.”

He and Madeline turn and start heading back up the aisle. Sabine shoots me a glare, grimly shaking her head back and forth.

“*You’re distracted*,” she mouths at me.

“*Mind your own business*,” I mouth back.

She rolls her eyes and then wheels herself back up the aisle.

Evelina shivers when I turn to her with fire in my gaze. I step into her personal space, relishing the way she gasps softly and backs up against the stage when my hand wraps around her throat.

“My meeting is only an hour,” I growl, looking her right in the eye. “Don't fucking *move* from this spot. When I’m done, I’m going to come back here, bend you over the front row, and pound that slutty cunt until you squirt all over my cock. Is that understood?”

Her jaw drops open, her eyes staring at me as fire throbs behind her face.

“I asked you a question, Evelina. Is. That. Understood.”

She gasps, nodding eagerly as I squeeze the pressure points on her neck.

“*Yes*,” she chokes.

“*Good girl*.”

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EVELINA

Good girl.

I shiver, biting my lip as the water cascades over my body.

There’s something wrong with me.

Clearly.

I’ve spent my entire life thus far knowing exactly who and what I am. A dutiful bratva daughter. A mafia princess. Sweet. Polite. Sheltered. Probably a little too naive about the world, especially given my family's business, but I’ve also been *okay with that*.

Except now, I’m not so sure. About any of it.

I turn off the water and grab a towel from the hook, drying my hair before I wrap the towel around myself and walk from the showers into the dressing room.

For weeks, I’ve been desperately trying to convince myself that I’m in my current situation because of external forces beyond my control.

That I *have* to remain involved with Vaughn because I *have* to get into the Syndicate. If I don’t, Diego Torvallés will hurt people that I care about. I’ve been clinging to the narrative that I have to “endure” all of it so I can find out who the unknown Torvallés heir is.

I’m pretty sure it’s Carson King. I’ve poked around online, and Carson’s past really isn’t *that* hidden.

He’s the son of Rupert King, the founder and CEO of Rook Capital Investment Group, a multi-billion-dollar asset management firm. His mother is Victoria King, the epitome of “old money socialite”. They’ve both been linked to *dozens* of very public extra-marital affairs, but for some reason they've never divorced.

Carson was committed to a pediatric psychiatric hospital when he was eight. By the time he was ten, rumor has it that he’d run away from that institution, leaving a trail of police reports in his wake that were quickly buried by his parents.

Years later, after Carson was an adult, Rupert and Victoria came forward to “set the record straight”: Carson hadn’t so much *escaped* from the hospital as he had *gone to live with an uncle out of the country for a number of years*.

Sure.

In any case, never mind the tabloid articles online linking Victoria to at least two dozen affairs, Carson looks *nothing* like Rupert.

It’s no smoking gun, but *come on*.

If Diego’s bastard heir is in the Syndicate inner circle, it’s gotta be Carson.

But again, all that is part of the story I’ve been telling myself about why I *have to* do this.

Have to endure Vaughn and his brutal sadism.

Except… That's a lie.

Diego’s threats are real. But my brother runs one of the most powerful bratva organizations in the world, one that’s allied with a half dozen other *hugely* powerful criminal families.

Despite Roman’s feelings for our father, I could end this with one phone call.

But I haven’t. Because the other cold truth is that I’m not “enduring” Vaughn.

I’m craving him.

Reveling in the madness he brings, and the destruction he wreaks on me.

I finish toweling off and get dressed, stuffing my dance things into my bag. I brush my hair out in the locker room mirror, put on a little makeup, blush at myself, and then walk back out to sit on the very spot at the edge of the stage where Vaughn told me to “stay put”.

Not because I’m worried about what he’ll do if I don’t follow his orders.

Because I can’t wait to see what he does if I *do*.

Maybe this pull I have toward Vaughn and the darkness he offers really is a sickness. Because I know there’s no happily ever after to this story. Vaughn doesn’t want one.

The man fucks me like a *god* but won’t kiss me.

He won’t even let me touch him.

Well, I touch him in the context of wrapping my lips around his cock. Or raking my nails down his chest. Or grabbing his hair as he bites down on my throat.

But anything past that? It’s an uncrossable line for him.

No cuddling. No lying in bed together. He even bristled the one time I walked up behind him to *hug him* afterward.

And that’s the biggest problem with all of this. I can take the brutal sex. I mean, for God’s sake, I *crave it*, in ways that I know are probably deranged. I can also take his iron-clad “rules” and the insanely rigid way he lives his life.

But I want more than that. I could tell myself that’s my naïveté and lack of experience talking. But it’s not just that he’s the first man I’ve ever slept with. It’s that this *thing* between us—toxic, demented, and wildly unhealthy though it may be—is the closest thing to a relationship I’ve ever had.

My phone suddenly dings in my hands, startling me as it echoes through the empty auditorium. I glance down at the screen and frown when I read the text.

UNKNOWN

Hi, it's Sabine. Vaughn's meeting is running late. He won't be available until later tonight.

UNKNOWN

He asked me to tell you to go home to the city. He'll reach out later.

My brows knit as disappointment bubbles to the surface.

Damn.

ME

Okay, thanks for letting me know.

I scowl as I slump back on the edge of the stage, glancing at Sabine's text again. I mean, he couldn't tell me that *himself*, instead of having his friend who very obviously despises me do it?

His very attractive, glamorously French, *female* friend, who very obviously hates me.

I try to swallow back the sour taste of disappointment and feeling like I'm an afterthought before hopping off the stage and slumping into a front-row seat.

What am I *doing* with all of this when it comes to *him*? It's not that I'm being "forced" into it, and it's not that I'm scared to disobey him, as much as I keep trying to convince myself otherwise.

Is it that I'm scared that he's unlocked this darkness inside me that only *he* can satisfy?

My phone vibrates in my hand, pulling me from my thoughts. This time, when I see the name flashing across the screen, I grin widely.

"Who are you and how did you get my brother's phone?"

There's a pause before Roman speaks. "*What*?"

I giggle. “Just assuming. Since when does my brother have time to call?”

Roman exhales and chuckles deeply. “Okay, I deserve that.”

“Sure do,” I tease.

“Sorry, Evie,” he groans. “I’ve just…*fuck*.” He puffs out another breath. “It’s a lot, being the guy at the top.”

“I bet,” I shrug, grinning. “Hey, want to trade? I can start running things, and you can learn to *plié*. You could spend all day with Val while he’s wearing tights.”

Roman laughs in his rumbly, deep way. “Sounds great.”

“Psych,” I giggle. “I have *no* fucking interest in taking your job.”

He goes silent for a second.

“Huh. That’s new.”

I frown. “What is?”

“You swearing,” he chuckles. “I’m honestly not sure I’ve ever heard you drop an F-bomb.”

I snort. “Please. I’m not *that* much of a prude.”

“Uhh… You actually are.”

“*Ha ha ha*,” I mutter with a smile as he laughs. “So, what’s up?”

“What, I can’t just call my little sister to chat?”

“You one hundred percent can, but you literally never do.”

He sighs. “We do *live* under the same roof.”

“And yet, we never cross paths at home,” I say pointedly.

“It’s a big house.”

“*Romannnn*…”

He sighs. “I’m sorry. Truly. It’s… Work’s been fucking *nuts*, you know?”

“Eh, it’s okay,” I smile. “I know you’re busy. So, you really called just to chat?”

“M-hmm.”

I grin. “Cool—oh, guess what, I’m at your alma mater right now.”

“*Man*, I gotta get back up there sometime,” he sighs. “I miss that place. Hey, I should reach out to the current leadership of Para Bellum and let them know you’re up there so often these days. I’m sure they’d be happy to show you around or take you to dinner or something.”

Normal colleges have fraternities and sororities. Knightsblood has four secret societies, like an underworld version of the Hogwarts houses: The Reckless, which tends to appeal to the warrior, daredevil types; The Ouroboros Society, which attracts the information brokers and the secret keepers; Para Bellum, which pulls in the future leaders of families, the generals, and the tacticians; and The Order, which is for the spies.

Roman and his friends, no surprise, were all in Para Bellum.

“Maybe,” I shrug. “I dunno if Para Bellum is really my scene. I mean, I wasn’t ever a student here.”

“Yeah, but you’re my kid sister. That opens doors.”

My lips thin. “Maybe I’d like to open my own doors.”

The phone goes quiet for a sec.

“Hey, you okay?”

I exhale. “Yeah, sorry. I…”

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Evie. Just, you’re *there*, they know me, and they could take care of you. They're my college club. That’s all.”

“No, I know…” I lift my shoulders. “But they’re not *my* college club.”

“Okay, I get it. Sorry.”

Roman clears his throat.

“*Fuck*,” he mutters.

“Rome?”

“Okay, there *was* a reason I called you.”

The edge in his tone pricks my ears. “Oh? Everything okay?”

“I…hope so,” he growls before exhaling heavily. “Eves, were you at a party at The Moon Room the other night?”

I sit up straighter in my seat. “What?” I breathe.

“The rooftop place in that new skyscraper near Rockefeller Center.”

“Yeah, no, I know what it is…”

“Well?” he grunts.

I frown. “Well *what*?”

“Were you *there*,” he rumbles.

My brow puzzles. “Why does it matter?”

“*Goddammit*, Evie,” he mutters, his voice sharp. “Were you there or not?!”

“Roman, I’m *allowed* to go out!” I snap, jumping up. “I know everyone pretends I’m this delicate little fucking flower, but I’m *twenty-fucking-three* years old!” My voice starts to climb. “I’m *allowed* to go to bars, I’m *allowed* to have a drink, I’m *allowed* to talk to anyone I want, and I’m *allowed* to do all that without being put under a fucking microscope!!”

The phone is utterly silent.

My chest heaves, my pulse thudding as I squeeze my eyes shut.

“*Sorry*,” I say, looking down at the floor. “I didn’t mean to explode like that.”

Roman’s quiet for another second before he clears his throat. “It’s…fine,” he grunts. “And you’re right. I’m…” He sighs. “I forget sometimes that you’re more than just my kid sister.”

“I’ll always be your sister, Rome,” I smile wryly, “but I’m not a kid anymore.”

“I know,” he sighs. “But—look, I have to say this, and it’s *not* just because you’re my sister…”

My brow furrows. “Okayyy?”

“From the gratuitous F-bombs just now, I can assume you *were* at a party at the Moon Room the other night?”

I wince but don't answer.

“Evie—“

“*Yes*, okay?” I mutter. “I was.”

“With Gabriella De Luca.”

My jaw tenses. “*So*?” I snap.

Roman blows air into the phone. “Evie, you understand who was throwing that fucking party, right?”

“*AND*?” I hiss.

“*And* I have a right to be worried about you hanging out with Val’s Bond-villain brother’s band of psychopaths!” he yells back. “Evie, The Syndicate is fucking *dangerous*, okay?!”

“And we were raised in the freaking *bratva*!” I spit back. “Roman, I know you think of me as this little Disney princess, but I didn’t *literally* grow up surrounded by dancing woodland creatures! I'm a big girl, and I can take care of myself!!”

“*What the fuck you were doing at a Syndicate inner-circle party*!” he roars.

“*None of your fucking business!!!*”

I stab the end call button and start to pace, seething.

I mean, I love my brother, but are you *fucking kidding me*?!

I draw in a deep breath and then exhale, trying to flush away the tension.

I should call him back.

But I also just want to get home. I can talk to him there later.

I heft my bag onto my shoulder and then walk to one of the side doors. Out in the hallway, I grumble to myself as I head toward the neon red exit sign.

"*Don't fucking move from this spot,*" I sing-song to myself snippily. "*My meeting is only an hour.*"

Yeah, and then he just gets his little girlfriend Sabine to tell me he's too busy to come back.

I scowl as I kick open the exit door and step outside. The night air is cool, and I frown as I glance around.

Fuuuuck.

I'm on the opposite side of the building from the parking lot.

The Fonteyn Theater sits on the edge of campus, near the woods, and because I've taken the wrong exit, I'm now standing in the shadows, near those woods. At night. *Alone*.

Great freaking job, self.

I grumble to myself and quickly start down the paved pathway that leads around the building, back towards the parking lot.

A stick cracks nearby.

I freeze, my ears pricking and my head snapping around as my gaze pierces the shadows near the rear door to the theater.

"Hello?"

My voice breaks a little as I heft my bag higher onto my shoulder and frown into the darkness.

Nothing there.

Just as I'm dialing my paranoia back, movement rips my head back. I gasp sharply at the dark shape of a man who's just appeared from around the side

of the theater and is standing ahead of me on the walkway.

The hulking silhouette starts to advance on me, sending a chill up my spine.

"*Vaughn*?" I whisper hopefully.

The figure laughs darkly.

"Try again, *bitch*," a man's low, rough voice rasps.

Suddenly, he's not walking toward me.

He's *running*.

I whirl as a scream rips from my throat, dropping my bag and running headlong back down the pathway. I slam into the wall next to the exit door and yank on the handle, only for my heart to drop like a stone.

It's locked.

I glance over my shoulder and see the man in black rushing toward me, something metallic glinting in his hand. The color drains from my face.

Holy shit.

Adrenaline roars through my system as I spin and bolt, screaming as I run away from him as fast as I can.

I can actually *feel* him chasing me, sending panic charging through me as the crunch of his heavy boots on the walkway gets closer and closer.

"HELP!" I scream. "SOMEBODY! ANYBODY! HELP!"

I know I should run to one of the other buildings—maybe one of the dorms. But with the theater being located where it is, and me being on the wooded side of it, there's nowhere nearby.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the blue light from one of those campus safety emergency phone station things. But it's too far away.

Instead, I run as fast as I can toward the trees, the footsteps chasing behind getting closer and closer.

Utter darkness swallows me as I bolt off the main campus walkway and onto the one that winds through the woods.

It’s well-lit. But I don’t want that right now.

I want to disappear.

I hurl myself off the edge of the path, sprinting through the underbrush and hoping to fuck the shadows hide me. Then I hear the crash and snap of branches close behind, and my heart climbs into my throat.

I haven’t shaken him off at all.

He’s closing in.

He’s so near I can hear his rasping breath and smell his cheap cologne.

Suddenly, he grabs me.

I shriek as he tackles me face-first to the ground.

“*Fuckin’ got you, bitch!*”

I scream and thrash and kick, still crying out as the man violently rolls me onto my back and climbs on top of me. His eyes are gleaming, and he grins wickedly as he presses the knife in his hand to my throat.

“I’m just ’sposed to kill ya,” he leers. “But fuck that, I think I’m gonna have me some fun first.”

He reaches for the hem of my hoodie, and ice water floods my veins.

“*NO!!*”

I scream and buck and kick. Suddenly my face explodes with pain and I’m choking on the taste of copper.

The man backhands me again, knocking my head to the side, making my vision blur.

No.

No, no, NO.

I go limp as I feel him shove my hoodie up my body and reach for my t-shirt.

…Suddenly, his weight is no longer pressing down on me.

His sour cologne is no longer invading my nose.

Suddenly, *he's* the one screaming.

I open my eyes, trying to focus as I watch a *second* dark shape drag the man away from me. My attacker is kicking and flailing, his face a mask of terror as the hulking shadow slams him against a tree.

"*You fucked up*," the shadowy shape snarls.

Wait.

The shadowy shape is *Vaughn*.

"Please!!" the attacker gurgles as Vaughn grabs him by the jaw and shoves his face around and to the side at a horrific angle. "Please! I—"

"The fact that you think you can *beg* your way out of this is fucking *insulting*," Vaughn rasps in a dark, cold tone I hardly recognize. "You *touched* her."

The moon filters through the trees, and I shudder at the venomous glint in Vaughn's ice-blue eyes when he shoves the man's head back, exposing his throat.

"*Please*!" The man chokes. "I'll do anything—"

"No deal."

Vaughn's other hand slams against the man's windpipe, grabs it so tightly that his knuckles go white, and jerks his arm back.

Holy GOD.

My stomach heaves as Vaughn *rips the man's throat out*. A wet, gurgling sound echoes through the forest as blood pours from the gaping, shredded hole in his neck.

The body drops heavily to the ground. Vaughn turns to me, blood dripping from his fingers.

“I—I—I—!”

My vision swims as he rushes toward me.

Then it all goes black.

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VAUGHN

SEBASTIAN

Where the fuck are we at with that confirmation, Wick.

GIDEON

Gimme a minute.

SEBASTIAN

I’m sitting here outside his fucking house with my dick in my hand like an asshole. WTF.

SEBASTIAN

V-man, c'mon. Just pull the trigger.

CARSON

I think he’s asking you to jerk him off, Marcus.

SEBASTIAN

TF is wrong with you?

CARSON

Hey, I’m not the one asking my boss to pull my trigger. That’s not how you get a promotion around here, Seb.

SEBASTIAN

I’m going to make you swallow your teeth next time I see you.

CARSON

make me swallow WHAT?? Is someone screenshotting this for HR?

JESUS *FUCK*.

Being friends with these guys is, at times, *challenging*. Not that it's hard to be their friend. But dealing with them sometimes really is like herding fucking cats.

ME

Gideon, I really need that confirmation.

SEBASTIAN

Give him the fucking confirmation, Wick.

CARSON

Mmm, yeah, pull his trigger, bb

SEBASTIAN

DUDE

ME

Both of you fucking STOP. Seb, can you confirm Beaumont is at home?

SEBASTIAN

He's home. I'm watching him get his dick sucked by his mistress.

CARSON

You kinky motherfucker.

SEBASTIAN

She looks kinda familiar…shit, King. I think it's your mom.

CARSON

I will flay your skin with a salted knife while you sleep, cocksucker.

SEBASTIAN

Speaking of sucking cock, what's your mom charging these days?

CARSON

That's it, motherfucker. You're done.

SEBASTIAN

Funny, I think your mom's almost done, too. Wick, CONFIRMATION. NOW.

I look up from the phone, gazing across the dimly lit living area to Evelina, asleep on the couch.

Rage coils inside me as I replay seeing that motherfucker crouched over her in the trees, pushing her shirt up and putting his fucking hands on her.

There's a reason Sebastian and few of his guys are lurking outside Jameson Beaumont's beachfront mansion on Long Island right now. That reason is curled up on my couch with a blanket over her, looking so sweet and innocent. So *good*.

So *mine*.

When someone fucks with something that's mine, they die. I just need confirmation of one thing first.

Jameson Beaumont is already on my shit-list, given that he was a close ally of my predecessor Étienne and is one of the assholes fomenting rebellion within the Syndicate ranks.

As the Marquis, I'm king and commander. But the infuriating thing is, I still can't just kick in Beaumont's front door in without knowing with utter certainty that he was behind tonight's attack on Evelina.

Any historian will tell you that the line between "tough commander" and "mad king" is a matter of perception. If Jameson Beaumont *is* mouthing off about me being in charge, sticking a gun between his yapping lips and pulling the trigger without proof he was behind the attack is a great way for me to lose even more control of this organization.

CARSON

I'm confused. Why isn't Seb dragging this fucker out by the balls yet?

This is why Sebastian and his guys are sitting in the shadows watching Jameson get his rocks off with his mistress. We *know* that the man who attacked Evelina tonight was working directly for Jameson Beaumont. But until Gideon's tech wiz friend can crack the attacker's phone and get *proof* of that—

My phone dings in my hand.

GIDEON

We’re into the phone. There are texts from Beaumont explicitly directing him to kill her.

My nostrils flare.

ME

Seb, you’re up. Call me when he’s in chains on his way back to the city.

“What’s going on?”

My gaze snaps from the phone to where Evelina is half sitting up on the couch, looking confused as she takes in her surroundings.

She sits up fully, hugging her knees to her chest. “Where are we?”

“My place in the city.”

She chews on her lip, watching me closely as I stand, walk over, and sit on the edge of the couch. My brows pinch.

“I’m sorry you had to see that tonight,” I growl.

It wasn’t my intention to literally rip a man’s throat out in front of her. It just…happened. Like the switch connected to whatever holds Demon back most of the time got flipped the second I saw that motherfucker straddling her.

Evelina looks half-numb, half-terrified, holding the blanket tight to her chest. Her face is pale as her gray eyes dart around, looking at anything *but* me.

Without another word, I haul her into my lap. She protests a little, but when I plant her firmly on my thighs, she goes still. Her shoulders curl in on themselves.

I cup her chin and lift her face to mine.

“It’s okay if you're scared,” I growl quietly, my eyes locking with hers. “But you don’t *have* to be. The situation is being dealt with.”

She blinks, her throat bobbing. “D-dealt with?”

“The man who chased you works for a man who has issues with me. Coming after *me* is mistake enough. Using you to do it is…” I clear my throat. “Anyway, it’s being taken care of as we speak.”

She nods quickly, her eyes dropping to her hands.

“Here.” I turn and reach for the bowl of grapes and glass of water I left sitting on the coffee table for when she woke. “You should eat something.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re in shock—”

“I said I’m *fine*,” she snaps.

I breathe in and out slowly through my nose, studying her.

“Why didn’t you wait where I told you to?”

Her brows knit. “Excuse me?”

“I told you not to move from that spot on the stage.”

Evelina glowers. “Are you *blaming me*? Because it sort of sounds like it.”

“I’m pointing out that you would have been safer if you’d done as you were told.”

I can feel her bristle on my lap.

“Well, firstly, I’m not your *employee*,” she mutters. “And secondly, *you* yourself told me to go home.”

I frown. “No, I didn’t.”

Evelina looks at me like I’m crazy. “Okay, maybe not personally. But Sabine texted me that your meeting was going late and you wanted me to head back to the city.”

What the fuck.

Evelina tries to slide off my lap. I hold her firmly in place with an arm around her waist and keep her tight against my thighs while I reach for my phone with the other hand to text Sabine for some fucking clarification.

“Look at my phone if you don’t believe me,” Evelina mutters, still squirming. “That’s exactly what she said.”

I frown when Sabine doesn’t immediately text me back, then toss my phone onto the coffee table.

“I’m sure there was a misunderstanding.”

Evelina snorts. “No misunderstanding. She just hates me.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

She shoots me a cold look. “Uh, *yeah*, she does.”

“She’s…protective of me.”

Evelina rolls her eyes. “Yeah, I’ve been around enough dance drama. That’s not protective. She thinks I’m a threat.”

My brow wrinkles. “That's insane. Sabine is like a kid sister to me.”

“Well, you’re not like a big brother to *her*,” she grumbles.

I roll my eyes and reach for the bowl of grapes. “You *do* need to eat.”

“I said I was fine.”

I pluck a grape from the bowl and bring it to her mouth. “Open.”

She glares at me.

“I said open your mouth, Evelina.”

“*No*,” she hisses through clenched teeth. “I’m not a child. I don’t need or want you to—*hey!*”

She gasps, slapping at me as I grab her jaw, force her mouth open, and stick a grape inside before I close her jaw for her.

“Eat it.”

Her eyes pull to murderous slits. Suddenly, I’m *wearing* the half-chewed grape when she spits it at my chest.

My gaze locks with hers. She glares right back, even though I can see the nerves jangling behind the curtain.

“Eat. The. Grape.”

“*Screw yo—AHHH!*”

She yells as I reach out and pinch one of her nipples hard through her hoodie. When she does, I shove another grape into her mouth.

“Chew it and *swallow it*, or the next pinch will be a lot fucking harder.”

Her gray eyes go downright stormy.

“I'm serious. Spit that at me, and I’ll put you over my knee and spank you until you can’t sit for a week.”

Her lips purse.

Then she starts to chew.

“*Sadist*,” she mutters after she angrily swallows the grape.

“Duly noted.”

She eats the next five grapes I feed her and even drinks half a glass of water.

Evelina looks at me, her brow furrowing. “Why are you so rough with me?”

I blink. “I’m rough with everyone. This is who I am.”

She nods, reaching for a grape herself and popping it into her mouth.

“You’re talking about more than just me feeding you, though,” I murmur.

She glances at me. “It’s just…you come to me, you hate-fuck me—”

“I don’t *hate-fuck* you.” I scowl. “I fuck you *the way I fuck*. And stop pretending you don’t come apart at the seams when I do.”

Her face flushes dark pink.

“You’re just…”

“Rough,” I growl.

“*Forceful*,” she retorts. “And sometimes…okay, a lot of the time…” She blushes. “I like it. I mean, you know…when we’re…”

“Fucking.”

Her lip catches between her teeth.

“Yeah…that.” She blushes even deeper. “But I’m talking about, like…” She shrugs. “Well, like right now. Making me eat.”

“You’ve just had a traumatic experience, and whether you want to admit it or not, that comes with a certain physical and mental shock for most people. The best way to cut through it is to raise your blood sugar levels.” I frown. “And you wouldn’t feed yourself, so I did it for you.”

When her mouth goes small and she sucks on her teeth, I exhale slowly.

“That's just how I am around things that belong to me,” I say gently. “And you do belong to me, Evelina.”

She blinks rapidly. “So, we’re—”

“Not we.” I gently shake my head. “I don’t do *we*.”

She frowns. “So… What does that make me, then? Your *possession*?”

“Yes.”

Evelina scoffs loudly, then stares at me. “I’m not *yours*, Vaughn.”

My jaw ticks. “You are. Emphatically. You became mine when you chained yourself to me at the initiation as my Acolyte.”

Evelina blinks rapidly. “*Okay*, but you’re still saying this isn’t a relation—”

“Trust me, that isn’t something you want with someone like me.”

She looks at me with a mix of curiosity and caution, like she’s trying to peel back the layers.

…Which is a decidedly foolish idea.

My phone dings on the coffee table.

SEBASTIAN

En route with Beaumont.

SEBASTIAN

LOL he pissed all over himself.

CARSON

You kinky motherfucker. I didn't know you were into watersports.

SEBASTIAN

You didn't? I would have thought it would have come up at your mom's house over Thanksgiving dinner.

I roll my eyes, put my phone down, and return my gaze to hers.

"I have to go take care of something," I mutter. I grip her hips and slide her off my lap before I stand. "You're staying here, princess."

She arches a brow. "*Says who*?"

"Says me," I growl, lifting her face to mine. I run a thumb over her bottom lip, relishing the way she shivers when I do. "Stay. Eat. Relax. Hang out. I'll be back."

* * *

"Y-YOU CAN'T KILL ME!!"

Jameson Beaumont is naked and tied to a chair with the middle of the seat cut out. I frown. I circle him in the small, windowless basement room, thoughtfully twirling the long strip of leather with the knot at the end of it.

"Hmm…can't I?"

I snap my arm sharply, cracking the leather strip up through the hole in the chair seat. Beaumont *screams* as the leather bites into his hanging dick and balls, drawing blood.

“Goddammit, Bancroft!!” he bleats, shaking and sobbing. “You *know* you can’t! The Syndicate would never allow it! If you kill me, you’ll have a goddamn mutiny on your—”

“Oh, Jameson,” I sigh. “I didn’t bring you here to kill you…”

He screams as I whip his balls again. I do it again, harder, then even harder the time after that. The vicious sound of leather stripping delicate skin from delicate parts mingles with the wet splatter of blood and his blood-curdling screams.

“I brought you’re here to *hurt you*.” I squat down next to him and gently pat his cheek. “And I’m going to really, *really* hurt you.”

An hour later, I’m taking a break outside. My lungs are enjoying breathing air that *doesn’t* reek of blood, piss, shit, and fear as I look at the city around me.

“She okay?”

Gideon steps out through the rusty metal door and leans against the brick wall, looking up at the neon and steel towering over us.

“Don’t even bother asking who I mean, dickhead,” he sighs, smiling wryly.

My brow furrows. “She’s…fine.”

“At your place.”

“She was pretty shaken up,” I growl. “Not that I owe you an explanation.”

We both return to looking up at the city before he clears his throat.

“I know forming a tight bond with your Acolyte is encouraged,” he murmurs. “I also know there’s also nothing explicitly stated surrounding lines that we should or should not cross…”

I turn to narrow my eyes at him. “Is there an eventual point here?”

Gideon lifts his brows. “I’m just wondering which side of that unspoken line hand-feeding grapes to your Acolyte lies on. *Maybe* there’s someplace far more important you should be right now rather than torturing that fucker inside. The rest of us can finish up here.”

I think for a moment. “Offer accepted. Thanks.” I turn to leave before I stop and half-glance at him over my shoulder. “Hey, Wick…”

“Yeah, brother?”

“Spy on me like that again, and I’ll fucking *bury* you.”

He grins.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m stepping back into my penthouse. It’s quiet. I smile to myself, wondering if she’s fallen asleep on the couch or if she managed to find a bed.

The couch is empty when I walk into the living room area. A slip of paper on the coffee table with a scrawled note stops me before I go looking through the guest rooms.

> ***I’m not a princess you can keep locked in a tower. I’m no one’s possession.***

I sigh, shaking my head.

The fucking *audacity* of this girl…

Then my lips lift slightly at the corners.

She's playing games with a hunter. But I’m not sure she’s fully realized yet how very much *the prey* she is.

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EVELINA

"WELL, THIS IS A SURPRISE."

Roman chuckles on the other end of the line. "Am I *that* bad at calling you?"

"Rome, we live in the same house and I don't think I've seen or spoken to you for a week."

He snorts. "Hey, it's a big house. And I keep tabs on you through Val."

I roll my eyes as I adjust the AirPod in my ear and then ease my hands down my outstretched left leg, relaxing into the deep stretch in my hamstring.

"I'm not sure 'my boyfriend is the intermediary between me and my sister' is quite the flex you think it is."

My brother laughs. "You're right. Can we catch up sometime soon? Dinner?"

"Anytime. You're the one with the impossible schedule, *pakhan*," I say dryly.

Roman goes quiet for a second before he clears his throat. "Actually, there was something important I was calling you about."

I frown. "Your ridiculous schedule?"

"No. Dad."

I tense, the smile fading from my lips.

Roman sighs. “I got some news from Moscow this morning.”

Oh God.

“*Rome—*”

“He’s fine, Evie,” he grumbles.

I exhale heavily.

“He’s apparently struck a deal with the Egorov family,” he grunts. “I don’t know shit about them, but they’re a small-time bratva family. I have no idea what the fuck Pavel had to offer them, but he’s officially under their protection now.”

“Well, don’t sound *too* happy about it,” I mutter.

“Evie, you’ll forgive my lack of fucks to give about our father after he stuck a fucking *gun* in Val’s face *and mine*, in case you’ve forgotten,” he says sharply.

“I haven’t,” I sigh. “It’s just… He’s our *father*.”

“That’s a matter of perspective,” he snaps. “And it’s pretty clear we have differing ones on the subject.”

“I know he’s an asshole!” I yell. “I know he’s done *awful*, unforgivable things. But I'm sorry, I still don't want to see him killed!”

“I don’t either, Eves! If I did, he’d be fucking *dead*, not banished!”

Both of us go quiet for a moment.

“You weren’t *there*,” he says gently. “You didn’t see him put a fucking *gun* to the forehead of someone you love so much it hurts. I may not want to see my own father dead, but in every other sense of the word, he’s fucking dead to me already. I need you to understand that.”

I nod, closing my eyes. “You're right, Rome,” I exhale. “I wasn’t there. It’s just…”

“I know,” he says.

We both take a breath before I blow air through my lips. “Can we please change the subject?”

He chuckles quietly. “I’d love to talk about literally anything else. And on that note…” He clears his throat. “I saw Ethan Campbell this morning.”

I stiffen. “You weren’t kidding about *anything* else. My psychotically overprotective big brother wants to talk about *my ex-boyfriend*?”

Roman laughs. “You know how I’ve been looking into better asset management for the organization? Ethan’s a senior managing partner at Hudson Equity, and he reached out the other day. I’m probably going to go with Ironclad Holdings, since that's Gavan Tsarenko’s firm and he’s also bratva and all. But Ethan gave a pretty compelling pitch, and I respect that he came to me despite…you know…”

I roll my eyes. “What, *kissing me* a handful of times? When he was my boyfriend? The *audacity*.”

“Har har har,” Roman laughs. “It still took balls. So we sat down this morning.”

“And?”

“It was a great presentation, and their performance numbers are solid, but I’m probably still going with Gavan.”

I frown. “So… Why are you telling me this?”

Roman exhales. “Because Ethan *may* have asked me about you, and if I would pass along his number.”

I arch a brow. “Really?”

My phone dings.

“Really,” Roman chuckles. “I just texted it to you.”

* * *

THIS IS A BAD IDEA.

Really bad.

I know that. But there's another part of me that is shrugging nonchalantly on the inside as I hug Ethan and walk into the restaurant with him.

So what if I want to have dinner with an old friend? Someone who might even be doing business with my family?

That's all this is: a catchup.

I scowl to myself as Ethan pulls out my chair in the private dining room of Trasimeno. Why am I justifying this as if I'm presenting to a grand jury? I'm not doing anything wrong.

He's made that perfectly clear.

Vaughn isn't my boyfriend. We're not a "we". We just…have sex a lot.

Really good, *really* rough sex.

Beyond that, I'm simply a potential pledge to his organization.

No more.

Again, he's made that abundantly clear.

Also, I'm not doing anything wrong by having dinner with Ethan. I'm not *cheating* on anyone. There's nothing remotely romantic about this dinner aside from the ancient history that Ethan and I very briefly dated.

I wasn't really interested in him then, and I'm certainly not now. He's cute and charming enough, but…no. And besides, even if I *was* interested in pursuing something with him again, it's not even on the table. Ethan filled me in on his fiancée—who sounds *lovely*—when we caught up earlier on the phone.

Ugh, why the hell do I still feel like I need to defend this?

"So," Ethan smiles after our waiter pours some wine and then discreetly exits. "I sort of indirectly asked earlier, but you danced around the answer."

I smile curiously as I lift my glass to his in a toast. “Indirectly asked what?”

Ethan chuckles. “If you were seeing anyone.”

Guilt stabs into me. I *hate* that it does.

“No,” I shake my head.

I'm just violently fucking someone on demand, entirely on his schedule. And yes, I’m aware how pathetic that sounds.

I laugh lightly. “Nope, nothing serious. Not like *you*!” I gush. “Tell me more about this fiancée!”

Ethan beams. “Evelyn.” Then he makes a face. “I know, it sounds like I’m being weird and looking for another Evie. I swear, I'm not.”

We both laugh, and Ethan shakes his head as he takes a sip of his wine.

“She goes by Linny for short.” He shrugs. “She’s British. It’s a thing over there.”

I smile across the table. “How’d you guys meet?”

He chuckles. “Work, actually. She’s in private equity…” He sighs. “At Ironclad Holdings, actually…Gavan Tsarenko’s firm, which I’m betting your brother is *probably* going to end up going with?”

I make a pained face. “I…”

“It’s okay.” He clucks his teeth. “I figured.”

“Feel free to bail on dinner.”

He laughs. “Wouldn’t dream of it. It’s good to see you, Evie.”

“Yeah, you too,” I smile as the door opens and our waiter walks back in with our appetizers.

Ethan’s just finished telling me about his and Evelyn’s plan to possibly move back to England in the next few years, and I’m starting to tell him about the Zakharova, when the door to the private room is kicked open.

I’m turning to see why our waiter just barged in like that when I see the frozen, shocked expression on Ethan’s face as he looks past me.

Oh fuck…

“Vaughn!”

I jump out of my chair. But he’s already barreling past me like a freight train and grabbing Ethan by the collar.

“What the *fuck*?!” Ethan yells, grabbing Vaughn’s wrists and trying to yank his hands away. “Who the—” Recognition suddenly bursts across his face. “Wait, you’re that motherfucker who got me wasted a few weeks ago!” His lip curls, and his eyes shoot across the table to me.

“Is this your ‘nothing serious’ guy?!” he snaps before glaring at Vaughn. “Get your goddamn hands off me, you fucking psychopath. What didn’t sink in the other night when you fed me those cocktails and God-knows-what else. I told you everything.”

I shiver as he jerks his focus back to me.

“Yeah, your fucking boyfriend *drugged me*, Evie. Picked a real winner here!”

I whirl on Vaughn. “You did *what*?!”

“I’m going to make this very simple,” Vaughn growls at Ethan. “Leave. Now.”

Ethan snorts. “Try again, psycho. I’m not doing anything wrong and I’m not going anywhere. I’m a friend of the house, you dickhead.”

Vaughn’s blue eyes glint lethally as his mouth curls into a dark smile. “Not anymore, you aren't. I just bought the place.”

He yanks a folded contract out of his jacket pocket and slaps it on the table before he gets right into Ethan’s face.

“Consider yourself no longer a friend of the house.”

Vaughn jabs a finger into Ethan’s chest.

“I would also consider leaving in the next four seconds,” he continues. “Unless you’d like your teeth for dessert.”

Ethan turns and shoots me a cold look. “What the *fuck*, Evie.”

“Ethan, I am *so sorry*—”

“Tell your brother he can take his business wherever the fuck he wants. I’m not interested in this shit.”

He shoves past Vaughn and storms out without another word.

My face is tight and throbbing as I slowly turn to stare at Vaughn.

“What *the actual fuck*,” I hiss, “was *that*?!”

Vaughn looks at me utterly calmly, arching a brow in amusement as he plucks my wine glass off the table and takes a sip. “So, we’re swearing now?”

“I can’t keep up!” I scream at him. “I mean, you’re with me, and you *fuck* me, and you save me. Then you tell me we’re not in a relationship—”

“Because we’re not—”

“And then you pull *that*!” I scream, jabbing a thumb at the door. “Here I am, having dinner with a *friend*—”

“*Don’t*,” he growls, the smug look on his face dropping like a stone. He sets the wine glass down, and my breath hitches as he steps close, looming over me. “Don’t tell me he’s a *friend*.”

I bark out a cold laugh. “What, are you *jealous* of a perfectly nice guy I went on a few dates with? It was *years* ago! And I didn’t even sleep with him, not that it’s *any* of your fucking business!”

Vaughn’s jaw tightens. “And yet, he seems to be a fixture in your dreams.”

I stare at him before a puzzle piece clicks softly into place.

“*Wooooow*,” I spit bitterly. “The audacity to get mad at me for having a dream—which, obviously, I can *totally* control the content of—about a guy besides you, while reminding me that we’re not in a relationship, all in the

same breath.” I bark out a mirthless laugh. “Oh, and a dream you only knew I had in the first place because you *broke into my house* to grope me in my sleep like a fucking psychopath!”

“*Careful*, princess.”

I snort. “You’re deranged. And not that I owe you an explanation, but I’ll say it anyway because I hope it makes you feel like a dickhead: I was dreaming about *you* that night, asshole,” I spit. “If I said Ethan’s name, it’s because I was annoyed that he was *interrupting* that dream.”

I glare at him, hoping for *something* that would suggest he’s human and *maybe* capable of remorse.

Nothing. I get *nothing* for my efforts.

My gaze drops to the folded paper on the table.

“Did you seriously buy the goddamn restaurant?” I snatch up the contract and scan it, my jaw dropping. “For…*seven MILLION dollars?!*” My eyes are wide as they dart to his.

Vaughn lifts a shoulder.

“That’s *insane*!” I spit at him. “I mean that is legit psychotic behavior!”

“You don’t know the half of it,” he murmurs.

“Oh, you mean like drugging Ethan?!”

He rolls his eyes. “It was sodium pentothal. He’s being dramatic.”

I stare at him. “You gave my ex-boyfriend *truth serum*?” I shriek. “And then grilled him about our relationship? Vaughn, what the *fuck*—”

Adrenaline spikes in my system as he wraps his fingers around my throat.

“Would you rather I tied him to a rusty chair in a basement and cut pieces of him off while I asked him those same questions? Or perhaps I could *fuck you* in front of him just so he’s clear on *whose you are*.”

“No!” I snap, grabbing his wrist and tearing his hand away from my throat. “You don’t get to just keep fucking me whenever you want.”

He sighs. “We both know *no* isn’t a word that will stop me—”

“I’ll use it.”

He goes still at the coldness in my tone.

“I’ll fucking *use it*,” I say tightly. “I’ll use the safe word. Just *try me*.”

Vaughn’s eyes turn dark. Finally he exhales slowly, a low growl rumbling in his throat. “Fine. What are they.”

I frown. “What are what?”

“Your demands.”

“*Demands*?”

“You just made a threat, Evelina,” he says patiently. “Therefore, you have demands you want met or you’ll make good on said threat. So what. The fuck. *Are* they.”

I think for a moment, then smirk at him. “You’re going to do something you don’t do.”

Vaughn’s icy eyes cut into me as I try not to visibly shudder. It feels like I’m staring down the barrel of a gun, or trying to negotiate with a wild animal that already has the taste of blood on its tongue.

I take a shaky breath. “If this”…I wave a finger between us…“is going to continue, then we’re a we.”

Vaughn frowns. “It’s not exactly *condoned* that an Adept *date* their Acolyte—”

“Then I’ll quit,” I snap. “I’ll take myself out of consideration to join the Syndicate.”

“And your father?” he says with an amused edge to his voice.

“*Don’t*,” I snap, holding a finger up to his face. “Don’t you *dare* try and hold that over my head. I’ll walk away and I’ll find some other way to help him.” My lip curls. “Some other *one*.”

Vaughn’s face and gorgeous eyes darken lethally.

The seconds tick by agonizingly slowly.

“Fine.”

Wait.

“What?” I blurt, my brow knitting.

“I said *fine*,” he growls, his eyes piercing into mine. “We’re a fucking *we.*”

Delight flickers and jumps inside me.

“And what does that mean?” I murmur.

“How the *fuck* should I know?” he grunts. “You tell me.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, trying not to grin.

“It means we’re together. Like, together-together.”

He rolls his eyes. “Jesus Christ. So, a couple?”

“*Yes*,” I mutter. “If I’m going to be having sex with you—”

“Which you are.”

Heat bubbles inside me.

“Well, then yes, we’re a couple.”

His jaw sets. “And that means…?”

It's my turn to roll my eyes. “You need me to define what a couple is?”

“I told you,” he growls. “I don’t *do* ‘we’. I don’t do couple, either.”

“If you’re with me, you’re *with* me,” I say.

Vaughn cocks a brow. “Elaborate.”

“Firstly, it means we’re exclusive.”

“Says the girl who was just out on a date with her fucking ex-boyfriend.”

I groan. “Are you serious right now?”

Vaughn grunts to himself. “Fine. Continue.”

“It means you take me on dates. We do things together.”

He frowns. “We already *do* things together.”

“You chasing me through the dark before fucking me on the floor is *not* a date.”

“How boring,” he drawls. Then he frowns. “By the way, if this deal involves me *not* fucking you, we don’t have one.”

I feel my face heat. “No, we do, it’s just… We have dates first.”

“And *then* I can hunt you through the dark, pin you to the floor, stuff your panties in your mouth and fuck your greedy wet cunt with my fat fucking cock?”

Jesus.

My entire body ripples with heat.

“Uh…*yeah*,” I mumble.

Vaughn’s jaw grinds. “Anything else?”

Yes, I want to scream. *I want to be allowed to kiss you. I want to wake up next to you instead of alone in a guest room.*

But there’s pushing your luck, and there’s asking for miracles.

“That’s…it,” I say quietly.

Vaughn eyes me for another moment in silence.

“Fine,” he finally grunts.

He touches the underside of my chin with his fingers and lifts my gaze to his.

“We’re a fucking *we*,” he mutters.

The flickering feeling jumps inside me again.

“But don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he growls.

Suddenly, he turns and walks over to the door and shuts it. A loud *click* fills the private room as he turns the lock and then slowly looks back at me.

The air grows warmer. The walls feel closer together. I swallow nervously and back away from him as he advances on me, until my butt hits the table.

“W-what are you doing?” I stammer.

“Dinner isn’t over.”

My mouth twists. “Oh, you’re going to *force feed* me again?”

“No.”

Vaughn reaches past me and violently clears the table with a single sweep of his arm. Glass, porcelain and appetizers all go crashing to the floor as my heart lurches into my throat.

“*Vaughn—!*”

I shriek when he grabs me, lifts me up, plants my ass on the table and then shoves me back across it. I shudder, biting back a whimper when he shoves my dress up, hooks his fingers into my panties, and rips them down my legs. The lace catches on one of my shoes, leaving them dangling from a high heel as Vaughn throws my legs over his shoulders and pushes between my thighs.

Oh fuck…

I cry out when he clamps his teeth down hard on my inner thigh before sucking on the bite, making me thrash. He does it again, his teeth followed by the warm rasp of his tongue lapping at the wound before his attention shifts.

My body arches and the air goes whooshing out of my lungs with a choked cry as his mouth finds my pussy. He drags his tongue through my lips, spreading me open before he sinks his tongue into me.

I moan, gasping and writhing as he tongue-fucks me, dripping onto the tablecloth beneath me, clawing at his hair. His mouth slides higher, and I

cry out sharply when he wraps his lips around my swollen clit and sucks.

Two thick fingers push into me, stroking in and out easily and curling against that spot inside. I moan louder and louder, my whole body shuddering and shaking as he fingers me and sucks hard on my aching clit.

He shoves my thighs back and apart, spanking my ass sharply and making me cry out as pain blooms within me, swirled together with the pleasure and that high only he is able to bring me.

He spanks me again and again and *again* before he pulls his mouth away and slaps my pussy. I squeal, pure fire exploding between my thighs. He does it a again, making me cry out before his mouth suddenly returns to my now-throbbing pussy, his tongue licking away the pain as I melt against him.

It's the mix of brutality and pleasure that does it for me.

The push and the pull.

The sweet and the sour.

He spanks me, slaps my thighs, reaches up to twist and tug at my nipples viciously while he devours my pussy.

Until suddenly, it all crashes over me like a black wave.

I scream into my hands, my body jolting off the ruined tablecloth as I come hard against Vaughn's dangerous tongue.

I'm still shaking when he bites my inner thigh and then starts to crawl up onto the table with me. He pushes my legs apart, yanks the top of my dress down, bites my nipples, and then snarls into my neck like a wild animal as he slaps my pussy with the swollen head of his huge cock.

"The next time you decide to have dinner with an ex-boyfriend…"

I scream when he rams into me with one brutal thrust, burying every thick inch of his fat cock to the hilt deep inside my clenching walls.

"You should know that I'll be fucking you in a pool of his *blood*."

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EVELINA

I WAKE up sore as *hell*.

My ass. My legs. My throat. My breasts and throbbing, brutalized nipples.

And my pussy…*Jesus*.

I wince as sleep fades away, shifting gingerly under the covers before I finally open my eyes.

"*Jeez!*"

I sit bolt upright at the sight of Vaughn sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Morning," he growls.

"You scared the crap out of me," I breathe, tugging the covers up to my chin over my nudity.

Despite my "win" last night of us now being a *we*, I've just woken up in the guest room.

As usual.

After Vaughn fucked me on the table in the private room of the restaurant that he now apparently *owns*, he brought me back to his penthouse and tied me up on my knees with my hands bound behind my back. He then proceeded to fuck my throat, come on my face, spank me until I cried, and fuck me twice with his hand around my throat, plus one *more* time after that with two fingers buried in my ass.

I was brutalized, punished, degraded and used, and I truly don't think I've ever come more times, or harder.

Not sure what that says about me.

Just the same, after we were finally through, and panting and gasping on the floor, and after Vaughn brought me to the shower where he tenderly cleaned me off, fucked me like an animal and then cleaned me off *again*, it's here that he brought me to sleep.

The guest room.

He, of course, slept in his own room.

C'est la vie.

"Morning," he says darkly, a twinge of amusement in his tone and glinting in the corners of his eyes.

"*Morning*," I mumble, blinking away sleep. Heat creeps up my neck and into my cheeks when I see him looking at me hungrily.

"What?" I smile.

"It's amusing."

I frown. "Amusing?"

"When you get self-conscious and try and hide yourself like this," he growls, nodding his chin at the covers. He leans closer, letting his lips brush my ear. "As if I'm *not* vividly remembering all the ways I claimed every inch of you last night."

Before I can say a thing, he grabs the duvet out of my hands, tugging it down to expose my breasts.

"*Hey!*" I blurt, trying to claw the covers back.

Spoiler: I don't succeed.

My lip slips between my teeth, my face throbbing as Vaughn's piercing gaze sweeps over me. I shiver as his eyes trace over my skin—the bruised slopes of my breasts, my swollen, aching nipples, the fingermarks on my

ribs and hips. He tugs the covers completely away and I shift, gasping quietly when he grabs one of my legs and forces them apart, his eyes sizzling over me and my wounds.

"*Stop*," I mumble shyly.

"What," he growls.

I shiver, looking down. "I look like an assault victim, thanks to you."

A smirk creeps over his jaw. "You bruise easily."

"Oh, is *that* the problem?" I snort.

"Didn't really seem like a problem last night when you were begging me to go harder while your cunt came all over my cock. You said—and I quote—" I gasp sharply as he leans closer and his hand pushes between my thighs to cup my bare pussy. "*Fuck me like you hate me*."

My eyes bulge. "I *did not*—"

A broken, needy whimper tears from my throat as he drags a thick finger between my slick lips. Then he pinches my clit, and the whimper turns into a guttural moan as my hands grab his forearm tightly.

He swirls the tip of his finger over my throbbing clit before he gently pulls his hand away.

"*Yeah, you did*," he murmurs in my ear.

He sits back, a smug, shit-eating grin on his face as I just stare at him.

"I have to go deal with something. But there's coffee."

He nods at a steaming mug on the bedside table.

"Oat milk. Three sugars," he adds.

My brow shoots up. "How—" I stop. "Never mind. I don't want to know. You probably stalked me or something."

He shrugs. I groan.

"*Well*?" I finally sigh. "How *did* you know that?"

“Stalked you.”

I giggle as he hands me my coffee.

“Make yourself at home. Your clothes from last night are cleaned and over there.” He points to a hanger on the back of the bathroom door. “Stay as long as you like. Sabine is around if you need anything.”

I startle. “*Sabine*?”

“Yes.”

Great.

A knock at the guest room door startles me.

“Come in,” Vaughn grunts.

“*Vaughn*!” I hiss, yanking the covers back from him and tugging them up to my chin just as the door opens.

Sabine rolls in, her eyes filled with their usual Arctic frost as they land on me.

“Morning,” I mumble.

“*Good afternoon*,” she smiles venomously back at me.

“We solved the mystery, by the way,” Vaughn says, standing up.

“Mystery?”

“Her text to you the other night,” he growls. “Sabine’s phone fell out of her bag when she was on her way to the theater to come get me for that board meeting. It was handed in to campus security the next morning, but there’s a gap of a few hours when it was out of her hands.”

“We assume that’s when the man who attacked you, or someone working for him, used my phone to lure you out of the theater,” Sabine says coolly.

I don’t say anything.

Vaughn turns to me, and I can feel my face heat as he bends down.

Holy shit.

My heart pounds as he leans closer.

He's seriously going to kiss me.

Then he does.

On the top of my head.

I smile tightly as he pulls away. “Anything you need, just ask Sabine,” he murmurs. “And text me any time.”

I nod as he turns and heads for the door.

“Be nice,” he says, arching a brow at Sabine.

She grins. “I’m always nice.”

Neither of us says a word as Vaughn leaves the room. His footsteps get quieter, then I faintly hear the front door to the penthouse open and shut.

“You’re not always nice,” I say quietly. “Or *ever*.”

Sabine purses her lips as she lifts her shoulders. “I’m suspicious of people who try to get close to him.”

An incoming text notification chirps through the room. She reaches into the bag hanging off the side of her wheelchair and pulls out her phone.

My face is stony as I glare at it, remembering the text telling me to go back to the city and the terror of the man chasing me later.

“Oh, just fucking ask me.”

My eyes snap up. She's looking right at me. “Ask you…what?”

“I can see it all over your face,” she sighs. “You want to know if I was behind what happened or *almost* happened to you. So—ask.”

My eyes narrow. “*Did* you send that text and then make up a story about losing your phone? It’s crossed my mind,” I say coldly.

“I really did lose it,” she shrugs. “A student found it and turned it in. There’s even a Knightsblood campus security report about it if you still don’t believe me.” She laughs lightly. “*Putain*, you must really think I hate you to believe I’d try to get you *killed*.”

“Gee,” I mutter back. “I wonder why I’d think that, with your welcoming personality and all.”

She rolls her eyes. “Would you like some honesty?”

I snort. “Oh, I’m sorry, have you been holding back thus far?”

“Oh, I’ve been holding back *plenty*,” she snaps. “Here, I’ll give you the full version.” Her eyes narrow. “I don’t like you. I don’t like that you’re bratva. I don’t like that you’re involving Vaughn in whatever this bullshit family drama you and your brother have regarding your father. And I *really* don’t like that Vaughn loses his fucking focus when you’re around.”

I stare at her open-mouthed as she levels a cold glare at me.

“*You don’t belong in the Syndicate or anywhere near him*. There. Happy now?”

My lips press together. “I have a question.”

“Fire away,” she says in a clipped tone.

“Are you worried about *Vaughn*? Or worried that it’s *me* sitting here in his bed without any clothes on and his fingerprints all over my skin, *and not you*.”

The smirk drops from her face as she glares coldly at me. I draw in a slow breath, trying to channel every ounce of Milena’s no-bullshit queen energy as I stare Sabine down.

“Interesting question,” she finally says quietly. “But, just for the record?” She smiles. “Last I checked, *Vaughn’s* bed is down the hall.”

My heart tightens.

“Anyway, enjoy the *guest* room,” she says. “If you need anything, go fuck yourself.”

She wheels her chair around and starts to head for the doorway, but then stops. Her shoulders tighten, and when she glances back at me her expression is hard and cold.

“There’s more to him than you realize,” she mutters. “But once you do, it’ll be too late.”

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EVELINA

“I SWEAR, that woman embraces sadism more and more every day,” Milena groans, slumping against the lockers.

Naomi giggles. “She’s *not*—okay, yeah, she might be getting worse.”

All of us are *beyond dead* after a grueling rehearsal at the Mercury Theater, home of the Zakharova Ballet. And the "sadist" Milena is referring to is Madame Kuzmina, our artistic director.

I resist the urge to say that, yes, I agree that Kuzmina is a sadist, and I would know because I’ve been regularly getting the *shit* screwed out of me by one.

Today is supposedly a day off. But Kuzmina called a few of us in for a “special rehearsal” which devolved into her barking directions at us, on repeat, until we were all ready to collapse.

Lyra shakes her head as she peels off her sweaty dance gear and grabs a towel. “Have we considered that this might be a cry for help?”

Milena arches a brow “*Pardon me*?”

Lyra grins as she turns and starts to walk toward the showers. “Maybe she just needs to get *laid,*” she calls over her shoulder.

“Wait, do we know which team she's on?” Naomi asks as she turns on the nozzle next to Lyra.

“Straight,” Brooklyn pipes up as she finishes her own shower. “That's from Kir.”

Brooklyn’s much older boyfriend is Kir Nikolayev, head of the Nikolayev Bratva and the owner of not only the Zakharova Ballet itself but also the Mercury Theater that houses it. He also has a totally platonic history with Magda Kuzmina. But he’s extremely coy about it, and Brooklyn swears even she’s never gotten the full story.

“He, umm, confirm anything else?” Naomi asks hopefully.

“*Nope*, and believe me, I’ve tried,” Brooklyn sighs.

Milena grins as she turns her water off and wraps a towel around herself. “How hard?”

“*Hard*,” Brooklyn giggles.

I’m the last one to finish showering, because I’m also the last one to get *into* the showers. Today, like every day at the theater for the last few weeks, I’ve been trying to avoid letting people see me naked.

It’s not out of modesty. Even previous, innocent Evie didn’t have a problem changing in front of people. I mean, I’ve been dancing my entire life.

No, the current issue isn’t my body. It’s what Vaughn’s *done* to it.

Bluntly, I don’t want to have to explain to my friends why I’ve got vicious hand-and-thumb-shaped bruises *all over me*.

So, for the last few weeks, I’ve been conveniently on my phone while the rest of them get undressed, then get out of my ballet gear while they’re busy showering, wrap a towel around the evidence, and slip into the furthest stall once the rest of them are done and getting dressed again.

I realize it's not a long-term solution. But for now, it’s the best I’ve got.

I’ve still got a towel wrapped around me when the door to the woman’s dressing room bangs open so hard it almost rips off the hinges and Val comes storming in looking *furious*.

“Dude,” Brooklyn frowns. “What are you doing—”

“Everyone out,” he hisses lethally, his eyes piercing right into me. I pale as the room goes silent.

Milena glances around and clears her throat. “Uh, Val—”

“*Everyone get the fuck out!*” he roars.

Brooklyn’s brow furrows as she walks over to Val.

“Hey, buddy,” she says softly. “What's up? You’re freaking everyone out.”

His throat works. “I need to talk to her…” He points at me. “*Alone*. Now.”

Brooklyn glances at me. I nod. “Go ahead, guys. Yeah, Val and I need to talk.” I smile weakly. “A surprise for Roman,” I lie.

“Is the surprise Val turning into a fucking psychopath?” Milena mutters darkly.

Val draws in a breath. “Sorry,” he mutters. “I’m…I’ve got a lot going on up here.” He taps his head. “Brother shit.”

Milena snorts and rolls her eyes. “Yeah, *speaking* of psychopaths.” She glances at me. “You want me to wait outside for you?”

I shake my head. “No, it's okay. Catch you guys later.”

The rest of them leave. Val glares at me in the silence.

“Val—”

“What the *fuck*, Evie!” he blurts. “*VAUGHN*?! Are you fucking high?!”

Crap.

“He told you?” I croak.

Val sneers. “Nope. But you just proved her right.”

My brow furrows. “Proved who right?”

“Sabine.”

I exhale. “Val—”

“*Jesus*, Evie,” he groans, shoving his tattooed fingers through his hair.

“First of all, I was going to tell you—” I begin.

“Bullshit.”

“*Eventually*,” I mumble. Then I frown. “And Sabine just told you to screw with me. She hates me.”

“She doesn’t love me, either,” Val growls. He exhales heavily as he looks at me. “But forget Sabine. Eves, are you *kidding* me? You’re fucking *my brother*?!”

“Hey, *you’re* screwing *my* brother!!” I hurl back.

“So this is, what, payback?”

“No!” I spit.

“Then why the fuck are you with him!” he hisses.

“Because I like him!!”

Whoa.

Too late to put *that* little dollop back in the toothpaste tube.

Val scoffs. “Not a chance. *No one* likes Vaughn.”

“He’s got those friends…?” I offer.

“No one who isn’t equally unhinged, I mean,” Val mutters.

I snort. “*Sabine* seems to like him,” I say venomously.

“*Yeah*,” Val snaps. “Because she’s just as fucking nuts as Vaughn and his band of lunatics!” He groans, shoving his fingers through his hair as he paces in a circle. “*Fuck*, Evie! You seriously lost your virginity to *my brother*?!”

I bite my lip, looking down as I pick my cuticles. “Does… Does Roman know?”

Val is quiet. When I look up, he’s still glaring at me.

“*No*,” he growls. “Not *yet*.”

I blink. “Is that a threat?”

“I’m not going to lie to your brother, Evie,” he frowns. “I can’t.”

“Val, *please*,” I beg. “I just… I want to tell him on my own terms.”

He exhales. “I understand. But if he asks before you're ready…” He looks at me ruefully. “I love you, Evie.” He shrugs wryly. “But I love Roman more.”

“Yeah, no…” I nod. “I get it.”

Val groans. “Okay, how about this: if he asks, I’m not going to lie. *But*, I won’t proactively tell him.” He levels a look at me. “You *need* to talk to him, though. I’m serious.”

“Thank you,” I exhale. “And I really will talk to him.”

Val nods and then looks away, raking his fingers through his shaggy hair again before he turns back to me. “Be careful, Eves,” he says quietly. “You don’t know what Vaughn’s capable of.”

“I—”

“No. Whatever you think you know, believe me, it’s not even half,” he says, his voice edged. “Trust me on that, okay? I love my brother…” His throat bobs. “But he’s fucking *dangerous*, and whatever is broken inside him is not anything you, or I, or anyone else should even *think* about trying to fix. You get what I’m saying?”

I nod. Then my brow furrows. “Hey, Val?”

“Yeah?”

“Are we…I mean… Are you and I okay?”

He sighs. “Yeaaaah, I guess.” He lifts his eyes to me, smirking. “I mean, I *did* fuck your brother first.”

* * *

I SPOT the black SUV waiting by the curb when I exit the alley behind the Mercury Theater with Val. But I wait until we've hugged goodbye and he's jogged off before I turn to it.

Vaughn opens the back door and steps out, impeccably dressed in a dark suit that fits him perfectly.

“Hi,” I say, feeling my cheeks heat as I smile. “Are you my ride?”

“Indeed,” he murmurs. “Your bags are packed and in the trunk, and I've got your passport.”

My brow furrows. “My *passport*? I thought you said this morning we were going to a ball.”

Vaughn slides his hand over my hip and pulls me close.

“Oh, we are,” he murmurs, looking deep into my eyes. “But the ball is in Paris.”

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VAUGHN

THE MASQUERADE BALL is really just an excuse to bring people of power in my world together. Everyone dresses up, arrives in fancy cars at the opulent Château de Villargent in Neuilly-sur-Seine just west of Paris, drinks expensive champagne, and then makes multi-billion-dollar deals in backrooms and boardrooms.

Sometimes in bedrooms, too.

Everyone's reason to be here is self-serving, mine included. Tonight, after months of dancing around each other, I'm going to be sitting down with the enigmatic Xavier d'Auvrelle, head of the *very* powerful d'Auvrelle family.

There are crime families and then there are crime *dynasties*. Evelina's family, like most bratva families, is the former. Even the ones founded decades ago in the Cold War years or even earlier during both World Wars *pale* in comparison to the sheer history wrapped around some of the old families of Europe.

The Torvallés family, for instance, goes all the way back to the Spanish Inquisition. The Syndicate, before it was what it's been for the last two centuries, was once an assassins' guild called "la fraternité d'obsidienne" and was active during *The Crusades*.

The d'Auvrelle family, meanwhile, can trace itself all the way back to Phillip II, the first to adopt the title "King of France".

So…to say the guest list at Château de Villargent tonight is full of powerful people is like saying Mount Everest is “a charming little hill”.

But right now, I don’t give a *fuck* about the meetings held here tonight that will shape what people read about in history books a hundred years from now.

“Um…” In the pied-a-terre I keep in Paris, Evelina blushes as she pauses in the doorway to the bedroom, wearing the gown I picked out for her.

I can’t tell if I should put her behind glass and hang her on the wall of The Louvre or chase her down, choke her with my cock while I spank her ass raw, and fuck her like a whore until she can’t walk straight.

“Both” is making an appealing case for itself, too..

There was a moment when I was considering a particularly dramatic black evening dress for her for this evening. There was also a stunning silvery-white number that I knew would make the metal in her eyes gleam.

But why try to fight the tide.

The pink, floor-length ball gown is decorated with gold filigree and silk flowers that cascade over the scooped neck, off-the-shoulder straps, and plunging back. The voluminous, layered tulle skirt blooms out from the fitted bodice, giving a full bell silhouette.

I didn’t *just* pick this for her because it’s fucking pink, though. I picked it because the gown is a perfect blend of whimsical and sultry.

It’s carefree and dreamy, but also luxuriously provocative.

Princess meets submissive fuck toy.

The good girl with a trickle of cum running down her thighs.

It’s so *her*.

And fuck me… Evelina in that gown might be the death of me.

“Vaughn.”

Her shy voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“I…” Her mouth twists. “I can’t wear this.”

“I beg to differ. You’re doing a marvelous job.”

Her cheeks bloom with heat. “No, I mean…” Evelina chews on her lip and lifts her eyes to mine. “I googled the dress.”

I say nothing.

“Vaughn, I’m not wearing a *four-hundred-thousand-dollar* dress to—”

I step right into her personal space, running a finger up her jugular before I delicately cup her chin, lifting her big gray eyes to mine.

“Yes,” I murmur. “You are.”

“It’s…” She flushes. “It’s *obscene*. That’s so much money.”

“The only obscenities going on right now are the things that dress makes me want to do to you *in* it.”

Her breath catches sharply as my gaze locks with hers.

I smile darkly. “I’m also betting on it creating the same sort of obscenities in the minds of the men I’m meeting with tonight.” I arch a brow. “I want them confused. I want their thoughts wandering, thinking about you and that gown while I’m hammering out the finer points of our deals.”

I gently lace my fingers around her throat and lower my lips to her ear. “*Besides, you look fucking amazing in it*.”

Evelina shivers as I pull back from her, her wide eyes still locked on mine. “*Thank you*,” she whispers.

“Now—show me the other part.”

Her face turns scarlet.

“Lift the gown, princess,” I murmur.

Her throat works up and down. “I… I’m not wearing that,” she mumbles, her face red. “I… Vaughn, I can’t.”

She means the *scandalously* flimsy, transparent black lace thong panties, tied with bows at the hips, that I left out for her along with the gown.

“Show me.”

She turns bright red, but she still gathers the clouds of pink tulle in her hands and lifts the hem up to her waist.

She’s wearing regular, plain black panties.

“Follow me.”

She hesitates, but then follows me back into the bedroom. The panties she *should* be wearing are still on the edge of the bed, next to the other little item I’m completely unsurprised she’s also ignoring.

Evelina gasps as I drop to my knees in front of her, her face throbbing. “Vaughn…”

Without a word I reach under her gown, hook my fingers into her panties, and slide them down and off her legs.

“I noticed you also aren’t wearing the other present I bought for you.”

Evelina’s face darkens.

“Vaughn, I’m not wearing a *dildo* in my pussy to a freaking black tie ball.”

I smile. “It’s not a dildo. And it's not for your pussy.”

I stand and pluck the little gold plug with the pink gem in the flared base from the bed before turning back to her.

“I don’t under—”

“It’s a plug, I say. “And it’s going in your ass.”

Her eyes bulge.

“I—*Vaughn*!” she squeals, her face turning the color of strawberries. “I am *not* wearing that!”

“An oversight we’re going to rectify right now.”

She gasps as I wrap my fingers around her throat, my eyes glinting.

"*Bend over*."

Her breath catches. "Vaughn—"

"It's either this," I murmur, "or it'll be my fat cock stretching that tight, slutty little hole out before we head out to the ball. Your choice."

"*Jesus*," she chokes as she stares up into my face.

But I don't see shock or fear in her eyes.

It's something *far* more dangerous and alluring: the part of her that *wants to* defy me so I make good on those threats.

It's the masochist in her. The eager cum slut. The submissive fuck toy.

The side of her that struggles not to whimper when I threaten to spank her ass until she can't sit for a week, or tell her I'm going to come on her face and leave it there throughout our dinner out if she doesn't come on my fingers in the car outside the restaurant right the fuck now.

There's a part of her that *wants me* to do those things. To have that power over her. Because just as having that control gets *me* off, *giving up* that control is what makes her come apart at the seams.

"Are you going to be a good girl for me, princess?"

She whimpers softly, her face crumpling a little as she nods.

"*Then bend over* and lift that dress."

She turns and leans forward across the bed. She reaches back, pulling the multiple layers of tulle over her bare butt. I allow myself to stand there admiring the perfection of her ass and legs, taut from a lifetime of dancing. The muscles rippling under soft, creamy skin. Her tight, puckered, inviting asshole. The silken, pink lips of her pussy nestled between her thighs.

She's *wet*.

"Open your mouth."

Evelina shivers, but does as she's told. I slip the gold butt plug into her mouth.

"Get it nice and wet, princess."

She whimpers as she eagerly sucks on the toy, coating it with her spit. It's wet and glistening when I slip it from her lips and then crouch behind her.

Evelina's spine snaps straight and a guttural, choked cry wrenches from her throat when I kiss her tight back hole and swirl my tongue around her ring.

"*Vaughn…*" she moans softly.

I press the plug against her slick hole and push. Evelina gasps sharply, her ass tensing. It's a *tiny* butt plug. But still.

That's one tight little hole.

"Relax, princess," I murmur, kissing one globe of her ass. "Let it in."

She breathes deeply, visibly unclenching a little. I push again, and this time, the small plug slips inside. Evelina chokes out a gasp, her legs shaking as the plug adjusts inside her, the pink gem twinkling between her cheeks.

"Good girl."

I have her step into the lacy panties, then I pull them up tight.

I can still see the little gem winking behind the thin strip of her thong, and my cock *aches* in my tuxedo pants.

Evelina's trembling as she stands. Her face is crimson as I take her arm to walk her out.

"*Shit*…" she chokes when she takes her first step. She glances at me out of the corner of her eye. "I…I can feel it when I walk," she whispers quietly.

"*Good,*" I growl as I lower my lips to her ear. "It'll remind you what my *cock* is going to feel like when it takes its place."

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EVELINA

JUXTAPOSITION.

It’s the only word that comes to mind as Vaughn, looking *gorgeous* in his fitted tuxedo, waltzes me around the grand ballroom of Château de Villargent.

Waltzes. Like, to an actual string quartet.

On the one hand, this feels like a fairytale. I’m wearing *the* most princess dress in existence, dancing around a French château ballroom in the arms of a dashing Prince Charming. Every step is like a dream. Every time his blue eyes glint into mine through the black masks we’re wearing over the top halves of our faces, I feel a tingly flutter ripple through my chest.

On the other hand, I’ve watched this “Prince Charming” literally rip a man’s throat out in front of me.

He’s tied me up. Spanked me and slapped my face. Fucked me like I'm a complete whore and his own personal slut. And just earlier this evening, he threatened to fuck me in the ass without any preamble if I didn’t do as he said and let him insert that…thing in my ass.

And I have loved *every second* of it.

I’ve craved it. Thought of it on repeat after the fact as my body longs for more. When he threatens me, I’m not scared of him. I don’t submit to his demands because I’m worried he’ll hurt me.

I do it because I *like* doing what he tells me to do.

Giving up control.

The pure peace and clarity I get when everything about me is in his hands.

The feeling of being put back together, lovingly, carefully, after he's broken me apart.

And so, as we waltz through the ballroom in our masks and finery, and I dance with him at a fancy gala knowing the savagery and monstrousness he's capable of, we're really two couples, melded into one.

The glittering prince and princess.

But also, the brutal Dom and his submissive sub.

Hence…juxtaposition.

"You're a *very* good dancer," I breathe, panting a little as the quartet finishes a seriously impressive—and fast-paced—rendition of "The Skater's Waltz".

Vaughn smirks a little but then dips his head. "So are you, but you don't need me to tell you that."

I grin, then my brow furrows. "Seriously, where'd you learn to dance like that?"

I mean, it was just a waltz, but it was *perfect*. So were the dances before. Which is…not something I'd expect from a man who rips out throats and fucks you on the floor with his belt around your throat.

"Someone close to me suggested I learn."

I smile grimly. "Let me guess. Sabine."

Vaughn's mouth curls into a smile as he cups my jaw, lightly brushing his thumb over my bottom lip.

"There's something very *fuckable* about you when you get jealous, you know," he murmurs.

“I know the feeling,” I breathe as his hand slips from my mouth and falls away.

“But no, not Sabine.” He frowns, then shakes it away. “Anyway, it was suggested that learning to ballroom dance would impress my predecessor, thus allowing me to get closer to his inner circle and eventually usurp him.”

I arch a brow. “You learned ballroom dancing to *kill your boss*?”

“And to impress beautiful professional ballerinas, should the occasion arise,” he murmurs.

“*Monsieur le Marquis?*”

We turn to see a young man in a tuxedo bowing stiffly.

“If you would care to follow me, Monsieur d’Auvrelle will meet with you now.”

I glance up at Vaughn, confused. Why does that name sound familiar? Vaughn just nods. “A moment, please.”

“Of course, *monsieur*.”

The man retreats and waits by a gilded archway to one of the many opulent hallways of the château.

“Xavier d’Auvrelle,” Vaughn says, seeing the question on my face. “The head of the d’Auvrelle family.”

It clicks.

“Wait, *that* d’Auvrelle family?” I blurt quietly.

The d’Auvrelle family is *old*-school. Like royal-adjacent, founders of the country old-school. Not to mention, they're an insanely powerful underworld empire.

Vaughn nods. “Yes.”

“*That's* why we’re here?”

He shrugs. “That and the dancing,” he murmurs. “Plus seeing you in this gown, of course.”

My face heats.

“In all seriousness,” he murmurs, “I’ve been trying to hammer out a deal between the Syndicate and the d’Auvrelle family for months, but Xavier is notoriously selective about taking meetings. So, yes, it took coming to his turf for us to sit down with him.”

I swallow thickly. “*Us*.”

He nods.

“As an…*us*?”

Vaughn looks amused. “After the shit-fit you pitched about us *not* being an *us*, now you have an issue with it?”

I bite my lip. “No, it’s just…” I lift a shoulder. “It feels like a big announcement to present us as an *us* to someone with that much power.”

Vaughn frowns. “And?”

“And…” My mouth twists. “Could I maybe sit it out?”

His brow darkens.

“No,” he growls quietly.

“Vaughn—”

“It’s important that you’re there, at my side.”

“To distract him with my neckline?” I snap. “To be your fucking *arm candy*?”

“Amongst other things, *yes*,” he growls. “Nailed it. Let’s go.”

“Vaughn, I’d really rather not—”

“And *I’d* rather not pin you to the wall later and ask you *exactly* what it is about Carson King and his background that you find so fucking fascinating.”

My face pales as his eyes pierce down into mine.

“W-what?” I mumble.

Vaughn smiles grimly. “You’re sneaky, but not so sneaky that I didn’t notice. Would you like to tell me why the fuck you keep digging into my very good friend's family?”

I swallow nervously.

Somehow, I get the impression that “I’ve been trying to join your organization to spy on you and your friends because a man you hate is threatening my family if I don’t find his long-lost son within your inner circle” wouldn’t go over well at this moment.

Or any moment.

“No reason,” I mumble. “His background caught my attention. That’s all.”

“M-hmm,” Vaughn growls.

His hand tightens on my waist as he look down into my eyes.

“Don’t think for a second I won’t pry your secrets from you later. But right now, we have an important meeting. Shall we?”

I nod quickly.

“Good.”

The young man from a minute ago escorts us through the huge château and then down a couple of flights of stairs, leading us deep underground and informing us that we can now remove our masks.

Armed guards wave us through two sets of heavy wooden doors set into stone walls. Finally, we step into a sumptuous lounge with smooth granite walls and an ancient floor, luxurious Persian rugs, and buttery leather chairs and sofas arranged in front of a huge, crackling fireplace that looks vaguely medieval.

There are four men and a woman already sitting—all dressed as if they’ve also just come from the ball upstairs—and they stand as we step into the room.

“*Monsieur le Marquis*.”

It’s the taller man in the middle of this group—obviously Xavier d’Auvrelle—who speaks, his accented voice low as his blue eyes glint. His tuxedo fits his trim, athletic build perfectly, showcasing his broad shoulders and muscled arms, despite obviously being in his forties. He smiles a pristine white smile as he shakes Vaughn’s hand.

“Welcome, friend,” he murmurs. “I trust you’re enjoying the party upstairs?”

“You’re a most gracious host,” Vaughn says crisply.

“I believe you know my advisors,” Xavier says, turning to the three men who look his age or slightly older. “Bertrand, Jean, and Pierre.”

Vaughn dips his chin, firmly shaking each of the men’s hands in turn.

“And this beautiful lady…” Xavier smiles as he turns to indicate the young woman who's about my age with gorgeous long red hair that tumbles elegantly over one shoulder and down her stunning blue gown. “Is my daughter, Cerise.”

Then Xavier's attention settles onto me.

“And who might this lovely creature be?”

Vaughn bows. “Allow me to introduce Evelina Nikitin,” he murmurs. “My…”

I brace myself for “assistant” or “Acolyte”.

“My date for the evening…for *all* evenings, actually.”

Heat tingles over my skin, creeping up my neck and face as I quickly glance up at him. But Vaughn is just looking right back at me, one brow slightly cocked and a smug expression on his face.

“*Enchanté*,” Xavier murmurs, bringing my hand to his lips and kissing the back of it softly.

Vaughn growls under his breath.

“Please, let us sit,” Xavier says. A man in a black suit quickly appears at his side, presenting a dusty, extremely old looking bottle of wine.

“I trust a ’64 Château Lafite Rothschild is adequate to wet our throats?” Xavier says smugly.

“Pity you don’t have the ’61,” Vaughn growls mildly.

Xavier grins widely as he takes the bottle from the waiter and turns the label to Vaughn and me.

1961.

He chuckles as he passes the *ludicrously* expensive bottle back to the waiter, who starts to open it carefully.

“This is what I like about you, Monsieur Bancroft,” Xavier smiles, wagging a finger. “You are a *chameleon*. You are whatever color you need to be to blend in. For your predecessor, you learned about classic literature and ballroom dancing. For me, you've brushed up on fine wines.”

“And vintage firearms,” Vaughn adds. “Shall we talk about those next?”

Xavier chuckles deeply as the waiter pours wine for everyone present and then takes his leave. “I do enjoy talking about my guns. I have a growing collection of pistols owned by various former United States presidents, and I’ve recently managed to acquire the Colt Single Action Army revolver owned by Sheriff Pat Garrett which slew the one and only Billy the Kid.”

Vaughn smiles. “How much did that set you back?”

Xavier chuckles. “*Eh bien*, who can put a price on history?”

“Papa means he’s embarrassed to tell you how much he paid for a second-hand gun,” Cerise says in a bored tone, raising a brow.

Oh, I *like* her.

Xavier sighs, spreading his arms. “Again, who can put a price on history?” He takes a sip of wine, then his gaze settles on…

Me.

“But you’re not here to talk about guns, are you, Monsieur Bancroft?”

“I’m afraid not,” Vaughn replies.

“Yes, well, your proposed deal is well thought out,” Xavier says. “Balanced…mutually beneficial…minimal risk. I like it.”

Vaughn smiles. “I thought you might. Xavier, both our organizations have legacies woven into history itself. I believe a signed agreement between us can ensure those legacies extend *far* into the future.”

Xavier nods slowly. “Indeed.”

He’s still looking right at me.

“Then unless there are any details you wish to discuss further, I see no reason why we can’t sign this here and now,” Vaughn says. He smiles and raises his glass. “We’ve even got the proper wine to celebrate the occasion.”

Xavier chuckles quietly, still looking at me. I shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“There is *one* point I would like to discuss in further,” Xavier murmurs. “Not one that is *part* of our deal. But it is…shall we say…a *condition* for that deal to proceed.”

I really don’t like the way he’s just…*looking* at me.

“What condition would that be?” Vaughn murmurs.

“Did you know that my family goes back all the way to Phillip II?”

Vaughn nods. “I did. It’s an impressive pedigree.”

Xavier nods. “*Oui*, we are quite proud of the lineage. But long before him, the kings and lords of the territory now known as France enjoyed certain privileges.”

The room is quiet as Xavier shifts his gaze from me to Vaughn.

“I assume you’ve heard of *prima nocta*?”

It’s debatable if it was ever actually a real thing, but *prima nocta*, or “first night” was, allegedly, the practice of a local lord being permitted to sleep with a woman on her wedding night, before her husband.

I’m no historian, obviously, but real or not, even the idea of it is *gross*.

I shiver when I see how tightly Vaughn’s jaw is clenched.

“I have,” he growls quietly.

Xavier smiles widely as his gaze slides back to me, and when it suddenly clicks, my stomach *churns*.

“Mademoiselle Nikitin,” he says with a gleam in his eyes. “Did you know that I know your father?”

I stiffen. “I…wasn’t aware of that, no.”

He nods. “Yes. Years ago, Pavel cheated me out of a rare vintage Ferrari I was trying to purchase from one of his Russian friends.”

My face crumples.

“I apologize on behalf of my father, Monsieur d’Auvrelle.”

He smiles blandly. “No need. A few years ago, I managed to purchase the car anyway. In fact, I drove it here this very evening, knowing I would meet you.”

Xavier exhales, sitting back in his chair. “I think me *fucking you* over the hood of that car and sending photos to your father would be suitable payback, *non*?”

My mouth falls open as I stare in horror at the Frenchman.

“I think the expression in English is *two birds, one stone*.” He smiles darkly. “I pay your father back for his insult. And the young *Marquis* here, who wishes to do business with me, pays his respects by granting me *my right*,” he growls.

Bile rises in my throat.

I snap my head around to stare at Vaughn, waiting for him to flip the fuck out and *kill* Xavier right in front of me.

He remains stock-still in the silent room.

My throat tightens as I whip back around to stare in horror at Xavier. He merely smiles at me. Then my gaze darts to Cerise, expecting her to chastise her father for his disgusting and hopefully just drunk behavior.

But she looks equally unbothered as she gazes right at me.

What the fuck.

I whirl to stare at Vaughn again. He's still just sitting there.

Jesus Christ, is he seriously fucking *considering this*?!

I'm seconds away from jumping to my feet and throwing my goddamn wine into Xavier's face when Vaughn finally breaks his silence. He casually clears his throat and *smiles* as he turns to Cerise.

"Mademoiselle d'Auvrelle," he murmurs, "would you mind excusing yourself a moment? I need to discuss certain *details* of this arrangement with your father."

Ice water churns through my veins. Cerise glances at me and stands. "Of course, Monsieur Bancroft."

I decide right there that I no *longer* like this fucking cunt.

Vaughn is silent as she crosses the room and slips out the door. Then he stands, casually walking over to the dusty bottle of wine sitting on the little table between Xavier's chair and the couch with his three advisors.

"Wonderful vintage, the '61," he murmurs before calmly pouring another splash into his glass and swirling it in the light.

Xavier smiles like a shark. "I'll throw in another bottle if my three friends here can have a turn at her, too."

I choke back more bile as Vaughn smiles down at Xavier.

"You know what I think, Monsieur d'Auvrelle?" he grins.

Xavier chuckles. “That this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship?”

Vaughn’s eyes glint. His hand tightens on the neck of the bottle.

“No…not that.”

It all happens incredibly fast. One moment, he’s just standing there, smiling at our host and swirling the obscenely expensive wine in his glass.

The next, it's pure *chaos*.

Vaughn’s arm jerks back, and with one clean swing brings the wine bottle crashing against the side of Bertrand’s head. The man grunts, his eyes rolling back as he slumps to the floor. Vaughn is already swinging again, this time catching Jean in the face and smashing his nose with the bottom of the bottle. Blood pours down the man’s face as he screams. Vaughn merely hits him again and then smashes the bottle against Pierre’s head so hard that it shatters.

I stare, frozen, as Vaughn lunges at Xavier. He grabs the Frenchman by the throat, yanks him from his chair, and then shoves him onto his knees so Vaughn is looming right over him. He brandishes the smashed bottle, still dripping drops of red wine like blood, then calmly presses the jagged edge to Xavier’s jugular.

“What I was *actually* thinking, *monsieur*,” he growls in a freakishly calm tone, “is that if you *ever* reflect on what’s mine again, I’ll cut your fucking heart out.” He hisses, resting the broken glass against Xavier’s throat. “You won’t look at her. You won’t remember her face. You won’t say her name, *ever*. If you do, I’ll find out, I’ll find *you*, and I will *prima nocta* your rarest, most prized bottle of wine so far up your ass they’ll need a sommelier to perform the autopsy.”

I stare unblinkingly at the violent scene in front of me.

“Nod if I’ve made myself clear,” Vaughn mutters.

Xavier arches his brow, but nods. “Perfectly clear, *Monsieur le Marquis*.”

“Excellent.”

Vaughn chucks the broken bottle across the room, kicks Bertrand in the ribs as he writhes groaning on the floor, then grabs my hand.

“Let's go.”

I’m still in stunned, shocked silence as he drags me from the room.

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EVELINA

IT'S ALL a blur as Vaughn pulls me after him back upstairs and through the ball. Suddenly, the cool night air tingles over my skin, and I realize we're outside.

He doesn't stop.

He yanks me stumbling after him as he storms off the driveway, through the side garden, then into the darkness past the floodlights illuminating the château.

"Vaughn!" I blurt, almost twisting my ankle as my heel catches in a divot in the lawn. "*Stop*! Where are we—"

He whirls, and for the first time since we stormed out of the basement, I see his face.

White. Shaking with rage. A cold mask of fury, vengeance, and violence.

"*No one talks to you like that*."

He surges into me, wrapping an iron hand around my throat and lifting my wide-eyed gaze to his livid one.

"*No one touches what's mine*," he growls.

He pulls me tight against him, his muscles twitching like a caged animal's.

A huge piece of me wants to throw my arms around him as my savior and hero, but his words stick and catch in my mind.

“What’s *yours*?”

His eyes narrow down into mine. “*You* are fucking *mine*—”

“So you freak out and go ballistic when an asshole makes a crude remark—”

“What *that asshole* said,” he snarls, “was—”

“Was just one more man making one more gross comment!!” I hurl back at him. “Vaughn, I’m a *woman*! I’m sheltered, but do you seriously think I’ve never had men say disgusting, vile shit like that to me before?! Welcome to being female! You want to track down every creep who’s ever brushed up against me on the subway or slid into my DMs with obscene messages since I was *twelve*?!”

“*YES*!” he roars, making me jump as he surges into me. “Yes, I fucking *do*! Maybe I can’t hunt down every fucker who's ever sent you a dick pic, but you’ll forgive me for taking the opportunity *to* do something when it’s shoved in my goddamn face!”

“Vaughn, I *love* that you stood up for me!” I yell. “And…okay…I kind of love that you went off the psycho deep end like that, probably more than I should.” I swallow. “But you’re missing the point.”

“So arrive at it!” he roars.

“You freaked the hell out when that asshole was a jerk to me. But that was *the whole reason* you brought me to the meeting!”

“Jesus,” he snarls, whirling away.

“Am I wrong?!” I yell at his back. “You told me you were—and I quote—*betting on it creating the same sort of obscenities in the minds of the men you were meeting with*!” My eyes narrow. “You said you wanted their thoughts wandering, thinking about *my body* while you were negotiating with them!”

Vaughn barks a laugh, shaking his head. “Un-fucking-believable.”

My brows shoot up. “*I’m* unbelievable?! For what?! Getting whiplash trying to figure out if you’re going to kick in a guy's teeth for holding a

door for me, or pimp me out for a business deal?!”

He storms into me and wraps his hand around my throat. His eyes stab into mine, his teeth glinting in the moonlight.

“I’m *trying*, Evelina,” he snarls. “But you’re…*FUCK!*”

“I’m *what*?” I yell back.

“*Fucking me up*!!” he roars, making me shudder under his grip. “I *never* should have allowed you into that fucking initiation! You shouldn’t even be here!”

“You *brought me here*!” I scream.

“Yes, to keep a fucking eye on you!” he bellows back.

“To *keep an eye on me*?” I blurt incredulously. “What are you talking about?!”

He chokes out a cold, guttural laugh. “You think I don’t know that you’re up to something?!” he snaps, his eyes blazing. “What is it, Evelina! Why the fuck are you digging into Carson's past?! What’s your fucking angle?! We both know you don’t give a shit about joining the Syndicate!”

“I—you know why I came to that initiation,” I stammer, my heart jumping erratically as I try and formulate words. “Because I wanted your help to save—”

“Your piece of shit father?!” He laughs coldly. “*Hilarious*. We both know there were other options.”

“No, I don’t think we do!” I snap at him.

He rolls his eyes. “You seriously think, fuckhead though he is, your dad doesn’t still have friends everywhere!? He sat on the *Iron Table*, for fuck's sake! There are dozens of people you could have gone to who would have happily helped him!” he roars. “So why the fuck did you come knocking on *my* door?!”

“How about you *tell me* about these *dozens* of other options!” I scream back. “Because trust me, I’d rather go to *any of them* than deal with your

psycho head games and sadistic sexual abuse for one more second!”

“Oh, like your cunt doesn’t drip all over the floor for my brand of sadism. Such a greedy little *whore*—”

The sound of my palm cracking against his cheek echoes in the night.

Then the entire scene goes *pin-drop* quiet.

My eyes widen, and my pulse beats in a rapid, staccato frenzy. My palm is still stinging from slapping him as Vaughn slowly twists his head back toward me, his cheek bright red.

“*Vaughn*,” I choke. “I—”

“You know what I think, princess?” he murmurs quietly, his voice eerily calm.

My pulse jangles as I swallow heavily.

“I didn’t mean to—”

“I think I’ve done you a disservice,” he growls. “You *think* you’ve been dealing with the full force of the monster inside me.” His lips curl dangerously as he leans closer, his eyes wild and glinting. “*You haven’t seen the half of it*.”

He draws in a slow breath as he slips his hand into his tuxedo.

“You think I’ve shown you the worst I have to offer.”

His hand slides back out, and metal glints in the moonlight.

“*I haven’t.*”

My eyes grow wide when I see the gleaming hunting knife in his hand.

“*Vaughn*—”

“Tonight, Evelina,” he murmurs in a quiet, dark, unhinged tone, “we’re going to change that.” His head tilts to the side, his eyes positively demonic as they shimmer like ice in the moonlight.

“*Hang on*,” I choke as I slowly start to back away from him. “*Vaughn*—”

He reaches up and loosens his bow tie, letting it fall undone before popping the top button of his shirt, letting the skulls and ghouls inked onto his chest leer and grin at me. Ice ripples through my veins as I take another shaking step back.

"*Please*," I whisper haggardly. "Vaughn—"

"Tonight, you're going to use your fucking safe word."

He shrugs off his jacket, letting it fall to the grassy field.

"You're going to fucking *scream it*. So *run*, princess," he snarls in a deep, vicious voice I don't recognize that sends ripples skittering through my body. "And run *fast*. Because when I catch you…"

The knife glints in his fingers as my pulse hammers in my veins.

"*I'm going to fucking break you*."

I kick off my heels.

I turn.

And I *run*.

I bolt through the dark field, angling toward the forest that abuts the château estate. Pure adrenaline and fear explode through my veins like liquid fire, incinerating everything in their path as my legs pump as hard as they can.

It's not enough.

He's too fast.

Too strong.

Too powerful.

I make it all of ten paces before a hand grabs my hair and yanks viciously. Pain explodes in my scalp, and I yelp as he brutally tugs me back and tackles me.

He slams his weight into me, pinning me down and shoving my legs apart as he gets between them. I scream and thrash, clawing and kicking, trying

to jab my fingernails into anything soft I can find. I catch something, and I hear his roaring grunt of pain before fire erupts across my cheek.

Holy shit. He just slapped me.

I want so badly to feel *furious*.

Instead, all I feel is a traitorous, tingling sensation creeping over my skin. The dark need inside me coils and tightens like a noose around my soul.

His hand wraps around my throat as his supernaturally blue eyes glint in the moonlight. He brings the knife to my neck. The tip nicks my skin, and I'm about to scream when Vaughn's mouth drops to the wound.

His lips fasten around it, *sucking* as his tongue drags over the cut.

My core *melts*, the combination of pain and the sensual, dark feel of his tongue and lips on my skin sending a lightning storm thundering through me. He bites down, growling into my throat as I moan, my hips bucking against his body.

Oh God.

He's *so fucking hard*.

Vaughn bites my throat again, growling and sliding his tongue over the cut. He pulls away, and I whimper when I see blood dripping from the corners of his lips and raw darkness blazing in his eyes.

His blade goes to the bodice of the gown, and I can't stop the needy, broken sound that erupts from my throat when he jerks his arm up, slicing the gorgeous, insanely expensive dress from my navel all the way up to my breasts.

He rips the gown open all at once, and his knife goes to my throat again.

"*Welcome to my monster, princess*," he rasps in a tone I've never heard before. He drags the blade over my collarbone, then down the slope of one breast, making my breath hitch sharply.

He brings the tip of the knife to the tight, aching bud of my nipple, sending a storm of pleasure mixed with fight or flight survival instinct exploding

through my system. Then the knife slides across my skin, making me shudder and gasp as he teases the lethal point over my other nipple.

The cold blade slips away, immediately replaced by his warm tongue. His teeth nip and then bite down hard, making me scream in broken, fucked-up pleasure as my back jerks violently off the ground.

Vaughn growls and shoves the gown up to my hips. I'm shaking with pain, pleasure, fear and raw, unhinged need for him as he pushes his hand between my legs and cups my pussy through the flimsy black thong.

"*My my my*, princess," Vaughn rasps as his mouth returns to my throat. He bites down again, making me shriek before his fingers start to rub my slick pussy through my panties. "You know what I think?" he growls into my skin. "I think you've been *waiting* for me to stop holding back. I think you've been aching for my monster to come out to play."

His fingers slip under the strip of lace, his knuckles brushing against my pussy.

Then his arms jerks, ripping the panties away.

"Is that why this greedy little cunt is so fucking wet and messy for me?" He slaps my pussy, and I cry out, thrashing on the ground as the lightning storm flickers again through my core. My insides liquify, and wet heat floods my thighs.

"What a *dirty* little *whore*."

Vaughn shoves two fingers deep inside me. I'm so wet that I can hear the squelching sounds of my pussy eagerly sucking on his fingers as he rams them in and out, over and over, fingering me hard and deep as my core clenches.

My eyes roll back. My throat closes. My heels kick and thrash at the ground as my pussy clamps down around his fingers and *floods* his hand with wetness.

Oh God.

I'm coming already.

Broken, needy, desperate sounds tear from my throat. Vaughn keeps fingering me, rolling my orgasm into another cresting wave that threatens to drown me before he suddenly removes his fingers.

My face caves, needing *more* from him.

His hardest.

His most unhinged.

His *worst*.

I need to see how deep his depravity goes.

"*More*," I whimper, shuddering as he slaps my thighs apart.

"*More?*" he growls, his body coiling against me as he drags the knife back down my skin. I shiver when he dances the tip over my nipple, my back arching into the edge of the blade. He drags it all the way down my torso.

Between my legs.

Oh God…

I shudder when he teases the flat of the blade against my clit, rubbing the metal back and forth as I throw my head back, clawing at the grass beneath me.

"*Vaughn—*!"

"Mmm, say my fucking name, baby," he groans.

His belt jangles open.

"Say my name. *Scream it* while I tear this fucking cunt in half with my cock."

The blade rolls over my clit before suddenly I feel him hot, swollen, and slick against my opening as he pushes between my legs. I jolt when he stabs the blade of his knife into the ground beside me, grabs my hips…

And then *rams* all the way in, with a single brutal thrust.

I scream, my back arching off of the dirt as I claw at his chest, shoulders, and arms. My heels kick into the ground as Vaughn pounds into me with deep, punishing strokes.

His thick cock stretches me to my limit and buries deep inside me again and again as I cry out, begging for more.

His hand wraps around my throat, and I shudder and writhe as he bites down hard so hard on a nipple that I swear he's going to take it off. Pain zaps through me, and when it crashes into the pure heaven of his gorgeous cock slamming into me, it all blurs into a haze.

I've had him rough before. I've had him brutal, and dark, and savage.

But this is something else.

Something uncaged and unhinged.

Something he's actively held back from me.

But the madness he brings kicking and screaming out of me won't go back in. It won't shut up, and it won't stop screaming for *MORE*.

And suddenly, it's not his unhinged depravity against my meager defenses anymore.

It our darknesses meetingeach other head-on, screaming bloody fucking murder as they go crashing together in a shower of sparks and moans and blood.

I slap his face again, then screech when he does it right back. I claw at his chest, my legs wrapping tight around him as Vaughn fucks me into the ground beneath me. His pounding, punishing strokes scrape against that needy spot inside me, stroking in and out until every part of me is rattling and screaming in ecstasy.

When he drops his mouth back to the cut on my neck and drags his tongue across it, I come undone.

I rip his shirt open and rake my nails down his chest as I *shatter* for him.

There aren’t any words to describe the sound that comes tearing from my throat. Or the way I claw at him, wanting to take him deeper and deeper until his whole soul and body are inside me as I break apart.

Wetness floods my thighs as he slows, grinding into me with deep, powerful thrusts, fucking me right through my orgasm until my legs are quivering.

Vaughn pulls out and suddenly flips me onto my stomach.

“*Vaughn*…” I croak, my head spinning as I pant into the ground.

“Did you think I was done with you, princess?” he growls into my ear.

I whimper as the knife slashes through the back of my gown, slicing it completely in two before he shoves it away from my body. His palm smacks my ass hard, then a second time as I squeal.

His hand slides lower and lower down my back, and I realize where his fingers are going.

“*Wait*—”

“No.”

I moan when his fingers find the gold plug that’s still in my ass and starts to turn it.

Oh my God.…

I whine, shaking as I try to flip over. But Vaughn keeps me pinned to the ground as he keeps twisting.

Jesus.

The friction of the plug against the ring of my hole sends lightning bolts through me. He twists back and forth as I shudder, biting down on my bottom lip.

He chuckles darkly when a needy sound hums from deep within my chest.

“Is your tight little hole ready for my cock, princess?” he murmurs into my ear as I writhe under him.

A desperate, guttural moan wrenches from my throat, and I groan and press my face into the grass beneath me.

“I… *You’re so big*,” I gasp. “Is it going to hurt?”

“You *want it* to hurt,” he growls. “You crave it, princess. You want to feel those tears roll down your cheeks as my fat cock takes that last little shred of innocence…don’t you?”

He twists the plug again, making me hum and whimper with pleasure.

Then he starts to pull.

My mouth falls open, my brow caving as he slowly removes the plug.

He lowers himself behind me, and I gasp when I feel him dragging his tongue up my ass crease, licking from my dripping wet pussy up over the clenching ring. He growls as he swirls his tongue around it, then pushes the tip into me.

Jesus.

My eyes roll back, my body turning to liquid fire as he tongues my asshole.

He pulls his tongue out, and I moan when I feel him spit on my ass. He does it again, then swirls a finger around my puckered hole before he sinks it inside.

“*Oh my God*…” I whine, panting as my muscles tense.

“Oh, my cock is *much* bigger than that, baby,” he rasps into my ear, easing in a second finger. He pumps them in and out and then removes them, spitting on my back hole again before moving over me.

My breath catches as Vaughn slides the slick, swollen head of his cock back and forth across my asshole. He spits again, then centers the head at my ring.

He starts to push.

Holy. Shit.

I shudder when the huge head finally eases past my ring with a slick pop.

“*Vaughn!*” I moan, whining as I tremble beneath him. He keeps pushing into me, sinking another *thick*, fat inch into my ass as I groan.

Something heavy and bulbous rolls over my clit. I jump, biting my lip as I twist my head to look back.

“*What was—oh GOD*!”

Pleasure erupts through me as the phallic thing slides into my pussy. He starts to pump it in and out shallowly, letting it roll over my swollen clit on its way out before pushing it back in.

“*What is that?!*” I moan as Vaughn forces another inch of his cock into my ass.

“Do you like it?” he grunts into my ear.

I whimper, trembling as I squeeze my eyes shut and nod my head.

“*Yes*,” I sob, my face burning.

He grabs my hips and thrusts, cramming another inch into me. Then another. His sheer size and the friction of his cock sinking through my ring has me on edge, my toes curling and my thighs shaking. My chest heaves against the ground as Vaughn slowly buries every inch of his cock in me.

The other object keeps pushing tightly into my pussy, and I gasp loudly.

“Oh, *fuuuck*!”

“Mmm…I knew this slutty pussy would love getting fucked by my knife.”

What the actual fucking fuck.

He slips the thing out of my pussy and brings his arm up, leaving me staring at the handle of his hunting knife, glistening wet with my arousal.

“Open your mouth.”

I whimper and dart my eyes to his. “*Vaughn*—”

Suddenly he thrusts hard, burying the last of his big cock into my ass as I squeal in pain and pleasure. He’s *so* fucking thick, it feels like he’s going to

tear me in two.

And I'm apparently as unhinged as he is, because just thinking that pushes me right to the brink.

I moan loudly, whining in pleasure as he grinds into me.

"*Open your mouth*," he growls again as he slides his cock part of the way out and then thrusts back in.

My eyes roll back, and I writhe on the ground as he buries his cock in my ass.

Then I open my mouth, and he slides the hilt of the knife between my lips. I close them around it and begin to suck, swirling my tongue around, tasting myself and whimpering as he starts to thrust into my ass again.

He slips the hilt out of my mouth and brings it back down between my legs. I moan deeply as he sinks it into my dripping wet pussy, making me feel even fuller as he rams his cock into me at the same time.

His hips move faster, thrusting deeper and harder, slamming every inch of his huge dick deep inside. The hilt of his knife fucks my pussy, stretching and filling me to my absolute limit as his thumb rolls over my clit.

I don't recognize the sounds coming out of my mouth as anything human.

I don't know the Evelina who's egging him on and reaching back to claw at him. The Evelina who's arching her back and sobbing in pleasure into the dirt as she gets fucked in the ass and the cunt like a total slut.

I don't even know if I remember who I was before this madness, before the beautiful monster at my back stormed his way into my world.

But I also don't know if I *need* to remember.

Or if I even want to.

I sob in delirious pleasure, hot tears trickling down my face and mingling with my raw, desperate, needy cries for *more more more*.

I come, my pussy flooding his knife and my ass pulsing around his pounding, relentless cock.

His hand wraps around my throat, squeezing tight as he fucks me even harder.

I come again.

Then again.

I don’t even know what my fucking name is anymore as I moan and writhe and drool on the ground, convinced I’m going to lose consciousness or fucking *die* from the orgasms.

“*One more time, princess.* Don’t you fucking quit on me yet. Give me *more*, baby. More orgasms. More of your cum. Give me *every fucking part of you, or I’ll come and fucking take it myself.*”

He thrusts deep and my spine snaps rigid, my entire core turning molten.

I scream a broken, aching, desperate cry of pleasure as my body wrenches one more time. Vaughn groans, burying his cock to the hilt in my ass as I feel him throb and pulse and twitch. His hot cum spills into me, spurting deep before he pulls out and strokes his cock.

Rope after rope of hot, sticky cum splatters across my butt and between my thighs, dripping down over my pussy before he pushes his cock back into my ass.

My eyes roll back in my head. I go limp like a rag doll as he grabs a fist of my hair and twists my face around to him.

I see a monster in the moonlight, madness glinting in his eyes.

A monster who grips my hair tightly, his icy eyes slicing into me as he lowers his face to mine.

A monster who then takes my breath away and breaks me into a million pieces when he suddenly *kisses me* for the very first time.

The world fades away.

I kiss him and keep kissing him until he slowly slides out. Until he wraps me in his arms and crushes his mouth to mine again, the shadows swirling around us.

A monster.

My monster.

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32

EVELINA

"VERY SLOPPY, EVELINA. AGAIN."

Madame Kuzmina's voice comes from her usual seat in the fourth row of the theater.

"*What*?" Milena mutters under her breath next to me on stage. "Dude, that was perfect. *You* were perfect. What the fuck is her problem?"

"We're waiting, Ms. Nikitin," Kuzmina says coolly.

I roll my shoulders and stand tall, then turn to her. "Of course, Madame."

Maybe that last run-through *was* perfect. Or maybe, as I'm starting to figure out, perfection is all about *perception*.

Sometimes, what you think is perfect only looks that way from one particular angle. Look at it from a different one, and you see how flawed it really is.

And yes, I'm talking about Vaughn.

I repeat Aurora's variation from the third act of *Sleeping Beauty*, focusing on the pure technique the role demands. But my mind is only half on the steps.

The other half is unraveling.

I'm unraveling.

I’d have to be insane to say this mad, wild thing with Vaughn is perfect. It’s obviously *not*, especially with this utterly confusing line we're tiptoeing between him steadfastly refusing to call us a couple, but then also being so insanely possessive and protective of me that it takes my breath away.

But if I can leave aside the “relationship” part and focus just on the physical, then…yeah…from a certain angle, *that part* is perfect.

He pushes me to my limits, then shows me that those really aren’t my limits at all and takes me further. He unlocks parts of me I’ve kept shut away because I was scared of them. The way he makes me come, and the way he fucks me…*my God*, the way he fucks me…

He’s awakened another side to the Evelina who's spent her whole life up till now hiding behind a pink tulle princess persona. For the first time in my life, I feel like I’m breathing with both lungs.

I feel like I’m finally, truly seeing *all of me* when I look in the mirror.

…And yet, there’s a dark side to what he’s awoken in me, too. A new piece of who I am that appears to be clashing with the “me” I’ve always been.

Clashing, fighting, and consuming.

And it’s starting to scare the hell out of me.

Because as much as I crave the rough, unhinged brutality of his touch, I’m starting to wonder if that part of me he’s unlocked is *good* for me.

Is he freeing me or corrupting me? Because even though I do feel that I’m seeing my true self now when I look in the mirror, I’m not sure I *like* what I see.

I’m starting to worry that there’s a reason my subconscious buried this dark part of myself that Vaughn has now uncovered, so much so that I’ve gone almost radio silent since we got back from France three days ago—sleeping at my house, avoiding his calls, texting back only sparingly.

Maybe that’s cowardly. But it’s also self-preservation. When I look in the mirror and see "all of myself", I need to be able to trust what I see.

I need to know that those other sides of me—the ones that crave a certain darkness that only he seems to be able to give me—are *me*, not just him projecting *onto* me.

Brooklyn and Milena invite me out to drinks after rehearsal. But I decide to stay late and work on the variation.

“You *know* you were perfect, right?” Brooklyn says sympathetically, eying Milena. “That’s just Kuzmina pulling her usual Gulag prison guard routine. Seriously, you were *fantastic* today.”

I smile, shrugging. “Thanks. I still want to hit it a few more times, you know?”

That’s only a half-truth. I’m not staying late to work the *Sleeping Beauty* piece because I think I need the practice. I’m staying late because if I go home right now, there’s going to be a mirror with a reflection I’m not quite ready to face yet. It’s also why I’m going to be working on *stage*, not in the rehearsal studio.

When my friends are gone, I step out onto the dimly lit stage, take my position, and begin. I start with the *relevés*, then move into the jumps into *attitude en arrière* before segueing into the first diagonal. The music runs through my head, the choreography firmly in my muscle memory as I continue to dance on the silent stage until sweat slicks my skin and my legs are screaming.

Finally, I hit the ending position, panting and gasping for air with my arms raised high overhead.

“So this is why you’ve been avoiding me.”

I almost scream, my heart lurching into my throat at the deep, rough baritone. I whirl, eyes wide and trying to adjust as I peer into the darkness.

Vaughn stands from where he’s been sitting maybe five or six rows back and makes his way over to the aisle. He slowly walks down toward the stage, and I swallow when he effortlessly hoists himself up onto it.

“You’re *very* good,” he murmurs, stopping a few feet away, towering over me.

“Thanks,” I mumble, looking at my feet.

“But you *have* been avoiding me,” Vaughn says in the silence of the stage. “Why.”

I shrug as casually as I can. ““I haven’t been. I’ve just been busy.”

He cocks a brow.

“You do understand that this…” I gesture broadly at the stage and theater around us, “isn’t just some little *hobby,* right? It’s my *job*, Vaughn. My career.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever suggested otherwise,” he growls.

“Well…” I swallow heavily. “It keeps me busy, okay?”

“I’m sure it does,” he replies. “But now why don't you tell me the *real* reason you’ve been pseudo-ghosting me.”

“I’m not *ghosting* you,” I snap.

“Avoiding me, letting my calls go to voicemail. The bare minimum of text messages to reassure me you’re alive.”

I shudder under his piercing blue eyes.

“I don’t *like it*,” he says coldly.

“Did you need me for Syndicate stuff?” I arch my brows at him. “Were any of those calls or texts about our relationship as Adept and Acolyte?”

Vaughn’s mouth thins.

“Because, unless it's that,” I shrug, “I have to practice.”

I turn away. Instantly, I’m gasping as his firm hand wraps around my bare arm, yanking me back to face him. He really is looming over me now, invading my space, filling it with his familiar scent.

“Why don’t we drop the childish bullshit,” he growls, his eyes narrowing, “and you tell me what the *fuck* is going on.”

“I…” I look away, chewing my lip. “Maybe I need time to think, after Paris.”

“*Why*,” he murmurs darkly.

“Maybe…” I look down.

“Answer the fucking question, Eveli—”

“Maybe I don’t like what you turn me into!!”

The stage goes pin-drop silent, and I wince.

“That came out wrong,” I sigh. “I just—”

Vaughn surges into me and cups my jaw in his big hand. A shiver ripples through me as he tilts my gaze up to his, immolating me with his piercing eyes.

“I think you like it just *fine*,” he rumbles. “I think you *crave it*, actually.”

Heat floods my core. But I steel myself, meeting his gaze steadily and shaking my head. “No. That isn’t me.”

“But it *is*,” he says tightly. “You’ve just spent your whole life pretending it's not. You’re welcome, by the way.”

I bark out a laugh, escaping his grip. “For *what*? Brutal sex that leaves me bruised and battered? For fucking me with a goddamn *knife*?!”

He rolls his eyes. “It was only the hilt. Don’t be dramatic.”

“Jesus, Vaughn!” I yell. “Do you even *hear yourself*?! This has to stop!”

I squeeze my eyes shut, trembling.

“It *has* to…” I say quietly. “Before I lose myself.”

Silence fills the theater.

“You know how to make it stop. You know how to end it.”

His low voice cuts through the stillness and silence, and a ripple teases up my spine as I open my eyes and look up at him.

“And yet, curiously,” he growls, “you continue to *not* do so.” His jaw ticks. “Is it because you just can’t get enough of my cock or of the darkness I bring out in you?”

I gasp quietly as he moves back into me, until his firm, muscled body is millimeters from pressing to mine.

“Or is it just because you haven’t dug deep enough into what you *really* want.”

I swallow thickly, and my brows furrow as I look up into his eyes.

“I just…” I rake my teeth over my bottom lip. “Why do I still feel like your possession?” I say quietly.

“Because you *are*.”

My brows pinch. “But that’s *not* what a relationship—”

“This is the only way I know how to do this,” he murmurs quietly. “*This* is what I can offer you.”

I swallow. “And if I need more?”

“I don’t trust myself to give you more.”

I frown. “Why not?”

“Because the parts of me you haven’t met yet would send you running and screaming.”

I shiver, chewing on my lip as I look up into his eyes. “And what if I want to run and scream?” I whisper.

“*Stop it*,” he groans.

“Stop what?”

“Being so fucking tempting all the time,” he says darkly. “You’re like a little bunny rabbit bathing in goddamn blood in front of a wolf.” He shakes his head slowly. “How the *fuck* have you not been devoured by the world yet?”

“*Because I’ve stayed away from wolves like you*,” I say quietly.

The second the words leave my lips, I shiver as his fingers wrap around my throat, his lips curling into a dark smile.

“*No you haven’t*,” he growls with a hint of amusement. “You are *very much* caught in my jaws, Evelina Nikitin.”

Heat pools in my core as he pulls me tight against his strong body, looming over me and sucking the air from my lung with his beautiful icy gaze.

“If nothing else, you’re *still* my Acolyte. And until you say that goddamn safe word, princess?” He lowers his face to mine until we’re so close we're breathing the same air. “*You’re still fucking mine*.”

My eyes lock with his.

“So *say it*,” he growls against my lips. “Just fucking say it.”

Part of me wants to, so badly.

But he’s not playing fair.

He’s too close.

He’s too tempting.

Too consuming, and his lips are *too fucking electrifying* as they hover a millimeter from mine.

The seconds tick by.

And by.

And I say nothing.

Vaughn’s fingers tighten on my pulse points as I melt against him.

“*Too late now, princess*.”

His lips close the distance, searing a brutal, claiming, possessive and punishing kiss against mine.

“*Now*,” he growls against my mouth as I shiver against him. “You’re going to get on your fucking knees, and—”

“No.”

His brow furrows as I pull back from him, hugging my arms around my middle as I shake my head.

“I…I *want* that,” I say quietly. “I mean I *really* want that, and all the other madness you bring.”

My throat bobs thickly.

“But I need more, Vaughn.”

His eyes narrow as his jaw ticks.

“More would destroy you,” he finally murmurs. “I can’t give you more.”

I wince. “Then I don’t know what happens now.”

His mouth thins to a line. “Well, I think I do.”

He turns and starts to walk away as I wince.

“But make no mistake, Evelina, me leaving right now is *not* you saying your safe word. And until you do,” he pause at the edge of the stage and turns, leveling a scorching look at me. “You remain. Fucking. *Mine*.”

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33

DEMON

THE WORLD IS a kaleidoscope of black, white, and blood red as we stagger down the hallway. Fire and venom course through our veins, our jaw grinding so tight our teeth hurt.

We slap our face with our hand, sending pain and more fractals of light sparking through our vision.

We do it again and again, just like he taught us.

Pain is a center. Pain is an anchor.

Focus.

Stop spiraling, weakling.

STOP FUCKING THINKING ABOUT HER.

With a roar, we kick open the door to the observatory and stumble inside. We grip the windowsill tightly and press our face to the cool glass. Our fragmented gaze takes in the mountains and the forest below, desperate to focus on anything that isn't *her*.

She wasn't supposed to *do this* to us.

We're stronger than her storm.

We ARE the motherfucking storm.

We kissed her.

Yes…and she kissed us back.

For brief fraction of a moment, we have clarity. For a flash of a second, there's almost even a smile on our face, and warmth in our heart.

We want so much more of her lips. Not just the way we've had them thus far—moaning for us, squealing in pain and pleasure, or wrapped drooling around our cock as we fuck her slutty little throat.

We still want all those things, of course. But we want more.

And there might not be any going back now.

"You're losing control."

Our eyes squeeze shut, our breath knotting in our chest as his voice rumbles behind us.

Within us?

"*Again*," Quentin adds.

No, we're quite sure he's behind us. We turn, and our eyes lock on the man dressed in black, leaning heavily on his ebony cane.

"Talk to me, Grandson."

I, not we.

I, not we.

We repeat the mantra to ourselves silently before we take a breath.

"I'm in control," we growl.

Quentin scoffs.

"Of course you are, Grandson," he murmurs. "Why else would you have captured that snake Beaumont and then…what was it?" He smiles coldly. "Ah, yes. *Let him live*."

Our jaw tightens. "He was tortured. He's *still* being tortured. I can't just kill—"

“Yes, you *can*,” Quentin snarls. “You’re the goddamn *Marquis*! Start fucking acting like it!”

“You don’t understand,” we hiss. “Executing him would embolden those who follow him, or who followed Veyrac.”

Quentin barks a cold laugh. “Don’t lecture me, boy,” he snaps, thumping his cane on the floor. “You don’t *torture* snakes. You don’t placate them.” His eyes narrow. “*You stomp on them until they are dead*.”

Our mouth purses. “W—I understand, Grandfather,” we murmur.

“And this business with Xavier d’Auvrelle?”

Our blood heats. “You weren’t there,” we snarl. “You didn’t see the way he disrespected her.”

“*My God*,” Quentin spits. “You lost your fucking cool and beat the shit out of one of the single most powerful and influential men in the underworld because he *insulted* your little *slut*.”

Venom floods our system. A black fury ignites within us, and before we know it, we’re storming across the room and slamming him into the wall.

Even as we snarl into his face, Quentin laughs into ours and shoves our arms away.

“You can’t hurt me, boy. I *am* you. Isn't that what you always wanted?”

Our eyes close. “We should cut you out, then,” we choke.

He laughs. “Don’t be ridiculous. Your focus needs to be on d’Auvrelle anyway. You crossed a line there, boy. A big one. You’ve potentially put this entire organization in a crosshairs from which it may not be able to escape.”

He exhales heavily, and his hand lands on our shoulder.

“I shouldn’t have called her that. But enough is enough. You’ve had your fun. You’ve played your sick little games with her.”

We wince.

“Now end it, before you have no more empire to save.”

“I can’t,” I murmur. “I won’t.”

“Yes, you will,” he says gently. “You must.” He shrugs. “You already play choking games with her, don't you? Push it just that little bit further.”

Our throat tightens.

“Accidents happen, Vaughn, especially when people play the way you do. Allow that to happen. Bury her and your obsession with her.”

He squeezes our shoulder a little harder.

“You’re *so close*, Grandson.”

He pushes the leather riding crop into our hands and closes our fingers around it.

“*Don’t let me down.*”

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34

EVELINA

"*Da*, HELLO?"

For a second, I don't know how to respond. My brain is short-circuiting, unsure what I'm supposed to say after not speaking to him for a few months.

"*Who is this*?" he rasps.

My throat bobs.

"Papa?"

The line is quiet for a moment.

"*Evelina*?" he finally grunts. "Is that really you?"

Guilt washes over me.

I'm not supposed to be doing this. Not just because it would "make Roman mad". The decision to send our father to Moscow was a decision the entire upper leadership of the Nikitin Bratva made together. The ban on communicating with Pavel…and yes, I freely admit that I've ignored that ban a few times…isn't out of pettiness. It's a mandate.

But the guilt I'm feeling doesn't come from breaking the rules. It's because I *get* why Roman hates our father so much. I wasn't there, but I *get it*. And yet, for the life of me, I still can't manage to feel the same.

"How are you doing?" I blurt. "Are you okay? Are you safe?"

“Ahh, my little princess,” he chuckles quietly. “Always so good to her Papa.”

Another twinge of guilt vibrates inside me.

“I’m okay, Evelina,” he sighs. “But… It’s hard. A lot of people here want your Papa dead.”

I shudder, squeezing my eyes shut. “I’m working on a plan to help you.”

He’s silent for a second, then he clears his throat. “Oh?”

“Yes. A way to get you home,” I blurt.

He chuckles. “Does your brother know about this?”

I wince. “Not exactly.”

Papa chuckles again. “Ahhh, *that's* my daughter. I knew your big heart would come through for me. So, what is this wonderful plan?”

I shake my head. “I can’t say yet. But I’m making a deal with an organization that has the power to help you and offer you protection.”

Papa tut-tuts with his teeth. “*Which* organization?”

My lip sucks between my teeth. “I…I can’t tell you that yet either.”

“But they can offer me protection?”

“They can get you *home*, Papa,” I say. “And keep you safe when you get here.”

“Why would they do that for me?”

“Just… I’m working it out, Dad. Don't worry.”

“Evelina…” he growls. “What are *you* doing for this to happen?”

My eyes close. “Pledging myself to them,” I say quietly.

Papa’s breath sucks in. “An arranged marriage?”

“Um…” I swallow. “Kind of.”

He mutters something I don’t quite catch in Russian.

“Is it dangerous?”

“Uh… No, it’s fine.”

He chuckles. “My Evelina. Always such a bad liar. And your brother…what does he think about this?”

My eyes close. “He...he doesn’t know this part either.”

Papa exhales slowly. “You’re doing something dangerous, against your better judgement, and without your brother’s knowledge…for me?”

“Of course, Papa,” I whisper. “You're family.”

“Ahhh, my beautiful Evelina,” he sighs. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

In the background, someone says something to him Russian that I can’t quite hear, and he sighs.

“Evelina, I’m sorry, but I need to go.”

My brow furrows. “You’re okay?”

“*Da*, I’ll be fine,” he grunts. “But this arrangement…*when* would I be able to come home and have protection?”

“Soon,” I promise. “Really soon. Just—hang in there, okay?”

“You’re a wonderful daughter, Evelina,” he sighs.

I smile wryly. “Be safe, Papa. I’ll call again soon.”

* * *

AGAIN, it’s all perspective.

Maybe from one angle, I could be *fine* with the situation with Vaughn. We’re just two people who happen to be into brutally rough, sadism-tinged sex.

It’s *very* clear to me at this point that that’s my jam.

It’s not like I had *no* experience of sex before him. There was Ethan, and our make-out sessions and heavy petting.

But that never did anything for me. Not because Ethan was bad at kissing, or had fumbling, cold hands or anything. It wasn’t *him* at all.

It was me. I realize that now.

Ethan’s approach was romantic and sweet. He’d kiss me tenderly, and when it did escalate, it was like something straight out of Hollywood. But when he put his hands on me, it was always punctuated by him checking in.

Is this okay?

Can I touch you here?

Does that feel good?

That drove me nuts.

With Vaughn, it’s…

Well, the polar opposite.

There’s *nothing* tender about the way he touches me.

He doesn’t ask permission, either. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like consent isn’t important. But knowing that at least with him, there’s just one word and one word alone that would stop him is…well…

…A *lot* hotter than it should be.

There’s nothing romantic or sweet with him. No softness. He’s all sharp edges and hard corners. Pure violence and darkness.

And what I’ve come to understand through all this insanity is that *I think I might crave that*.

I want his edges. I want him unhinged and unmerciful. I want him to completely dominate and overpower me.

I don’t feel subjugated in that headspace.

I feel freer than I ever have.

But again, perspective. Because as addictive as that feeling is, and as “fine” as I tell myself I could be with our relationship remaining what it’s been so far…

That’s not true.

It’s not *just* that I get off on brutal, unhinged sex.

I want everything else that comes *with* sex, violent or otherwise.

I wish I was one of those girls who can just casually have sex and then get on with the rest of her day. But I’m not. I need more.

And the problem is, I’m not so sure that would ever happen with Vaughn… "fine, we're a we" notwithstanding.

It makes me feel trapped. Because I genuinely have no idea where else I’d ever find the same cathartic release that his brand of deranged sex brings me. I also don’t *want* to find it anywhere else, because like it or not, and as pathetic as it might sound…

I like him.

A lot.

More than I have any right or reason to.

Before, it was a slow trickle that I was trying to hold back. But the more time I spend with him, the faster that trickle has turned into a full-blown leak in the dam. And since he kissed me for the first time in France, and then *again*, at the Mercury the other night…

I don’t even know if there’s any dam left to repair. Ironically, that's why I've been trying to keep my distance.

Because right now, the only way Vaughn and I seem to connect in any meaningful way is through our unhinged sexcapades.

And I need more than that.

“Hey stranger.”

In the kitchen, I glance up from my coffee and grin when I see Roman walking in. Then my brows shoot up as I clock his appearance properly.

"*Woooow*," I gasp.

Roman typically wears a jacket and dress shirt, no tie, the top button or two undone. Well, and pants.

Today, he's in a *stunning* charcoal gray suit with a French-cut shirt buttoned up all the way, a matching gray silk tie, tie-clip, *cufflinks*, and what I think is a brand-new Rolex on his wrist.

His typical beard scruff is trimmed, and his hair is neatly slicked back.

"Rico Suave!" I giggle. "What's the occasion?"

Roman grins, futzing with his cufflinks as he walks over to the coffee machine.

"I've got an important sit-down with the Sicilians today to hammer out a neutral zone between territories in Queens."

"Yep, and the Sicilians don't fuck around when it comes to dressing like a big swinging dick."

Val saunters into the kitchen, dressed far more casually in black jeans and a white t-shirt.

"So I made sure our boy here was looking fine as *fuck*."

He slaps Roman's ass, grabs it, then pulls him around to kiss him against the fridge.

"Hi, yes, hello," I groan. "Third wheel roommate *right here*."

Roman blushes deeply as he pulls away from Val. Then he grins and leans back in, kissing Val again before giving *his* ass a squeeze.

"Sorry, Eves," Roman chuckles. "But grownups *do* have sex with each other."

Val shoots me a look, and my face throbs before I quickly look away.

“Well, you look sharp,” I mumble at my brother.

“Thanks. It’s all Val.”

“Damn right it’s all me, baby,” Val murmurs, nipping at Roman’s ear before he slides past him in search of coffee.

I chew on my lip.

I want what they have.

The sharp banter and steamy looks. The private smiles and public kisses.

The ass-grabbing. Shared cups of coffee in the morning.

For one *insane* moment, it makes me want to blurt it all out and tell my brother about Vaughn.

Then I decide it's the caffeine talking and I've had quite enough of it for one morning.

“Hey, speaking of roommates,” Roman frowns, “it feels like we’ve all been ships passing in the night recently.”

“There’s a ‘big wooden mast’ joke in there somewhere,” Val sighs. “Gimme a sec. I’ll get it.”

I snort, hiding my face as Roman rolls his eyes.

“*Anyway*,” he sighs. “What if we all got dinner together tonight?”

I shrug. “Sure. I’m free.”

Roman grins, then suddenly winces. “Ahh, *shit*.” He sighs. “Sorry, forgot I have a thing with Nikolai Antonov tonight.” He frowns. “Lunch?”

“Not me,” Val shakes his head. “I’ve got lunch with my dad.”

“How’s that going, anyway?” I ask. "It must be so cool to have him back."

Val nods. “It’s...going? I mean, yes, it’s fucking awesome that he’s still alive, and I'm so grateful that I get to have all these conversations with him I never thought I would. But there’s still the past. Like, I don’t *remember*

him leaving Vaughn and I home alone for days without any food in the cupboards so he could go on a meth binge…" He taps his temple.

"Thanks, amnesia," he grimaces. "But there are emotions that come back, you know? Sometimes, there's a feeling of abandonment that bubbles up when I'm around him." He rolls his eyes. "Dumb shit. I've been working on it with my therapist."

I shake my head. "Not dumb. I get it."

Roman smiles as he wraps his arms around Val's waist and pulls him to his chest. "I'm proud of you for trying with him," Roman says quietly. "And I think it's incredible that he's putting in the effort, too." He shakes his head. "I can't imagine what it'd be like to try and climb out of a hole that deep."

Val kisses Rome's forehead and then turns back to me with a shrug. "It'd be nice if Vaughn tried *at all*. I dunno, maybe it's because he remembers way more than I do about that time in our lives. I've asked him a dozen times to drop in on our lunch for even just five minutes today, but I know he won't. It is what it is, I guess."

Roman nods, then kisses Val's cheek. "Proud of you, baby. Gotta run. Love you."

"Love you too, Wreckage," Val growls, slapping Roman's butt.

My brother blushes adorably as he glances my way. "Love you, Evie."

"Love ya, byeeee."

Val and I are silent until we hear the door shut. Then he arches a brow at me.

"So? How are *things*?"

I roll my eyes. "You mean with your brother?"

"If we're getting specific."

I groan and rub my hands over my face. "Can I please take a rain check on you grilling me about Vaughn?"

"Mmm…sure. But only because I like you."

I grin. Then I stiffen.

“Hey—what time is lunch with your dad?”

Val frowns. “Eleven-thirty. Why?”

I smile widely. “I might have a crazy idea.”

A *really* crazy one, possibly verging on “stupid”. But I think I *may* have just found a way to connect with the man I seem to be hopelessly tangled up with on a human level.

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VAUGHN

"SOMETHING'S UP WITH HIM."

I glance up from my desk to where Sebastian is pacing my office near the windows.

"Up with who?"

"Carson," Seb grunts. "There's something off about him."

Sitting across the desk from me, Gideon gives Sebastian the closest thing to a smile his face is capable of, his brow arching in thin amusement. "This is news to you after knowing him for close to twenty years?"

Sebastian glares at us. "I mean *more than usual*," he mutters.

I frown. "I haven't noticed anything."

"Well gee, no shit," Sebastian grunts.

"Yeah, you've been *slightly distracted*, V," Gideon growls without looking up from his laptop.

"I'm sorry, would one of *you* like to be Marquis for a week? A fucking day? An *hour*, even?" I snap.

"*Nope*," Gideon murmurs.

"Hell to the fucking no," Seb growls. "But you know damn well we're not talking about your official duties."

My jaw ticks. Seb rolls his eyes.

“Fuck off, Bancroft. We have *eyes*.”

I glare at him. “And what do these all-seeing eyes tell you?”

“That you’ve completely lost the fucking plot with your Acolyte. Tell me I’m wrong,” he says dryly. “Please. I would *love* that.”

My molars grind.

“So… What’s this about Carson?”

Gideon snorts. “Nice subject change,” he snickers.

“Yeah, fucking seamless,” Sebastian adds. “But I *am* concerned about him, so I’m choosing to ignore that. For now.”

“Again,” I sigh. “What the fuck is going on with Carson?”

“Please. Have you seen our text chain today?” Seb mutters.

No. I haven’t. I’ve been…*distracted*.

And they’re not in any way wrong about "my Acolyte".

I don’t fucking like this new “I have a spine” Evelina.

Well… That’s not entirely true. I like her pliant and submissive, obviously. But I do like her fight and grit as well.

…Just not when it’s directed at *me*.

I'm not stupid. I know what she wants from me. And it’s not that I can’t give it to her because I’m some mopey, tragic case who got burned in the past.

I can’t give Evelina what she wants, i.e., more of me, because the parts of me she doesn’t have are fucking *dangerous*.

Uncontrollable. Deranged. And quite possibly, at least sometimes, with their own agendas that override my own.

How the *fuck* would I explain Demon to her? Or worse, Quentin? How would I even *begin* to crack open that box of horrors, and tell her that I see and talk to my dead grandfather through a split shard of my psyche? That he hurts me but that deep down I realize it's just me hurting myself *as* him?

Exactly.

Evelina thinks she wants more from me.

She really, really doesn't. She'd understand that, if I could show her. But I worry that showing her might be the end of her, if Quentin got his way.

I hate the current state of things, though. After I went to see her at the theater the other day, and kissed her, we've lapsed back into a sort of radio silence.

I don't like it. I don't like not feeling her body squirm and writhe and scream as I pound into her.

Not seeing her smile.

Not watching her dance from the shadows.

Well, okay. I'm still doing those last two.

I'm still watching her. Constantly. But at least she *believes* I'm respecting her self-imposed distancing.

"No," I shake my head at Seb. "I haven't checked the text chain."

"You should."

I pull out my phone, tapping on my group chat with Seb, Carson, and Gideon.

SEBASTIAN

BINGO MOTHERFUCKERS

SEBASTIAN

Got a solid location for those three fucks working for Beaumont who were trying to sell Syndicate intel to the Triads.

SEBASTIAN

Pretty sure El Capitan is "busy" with his Acolyte.

I look up sharply at Sebastian.

“Just keep reading,” he grins.

SEBASTIAN

Who else wants to help me rain down some good old-fashioned violence and mayhem on these assholes?

GIDEON

IN. Can I bring my box of tools?

SEBASTIAN

Fuckin psycho energy. I like it. And hell YES.

GIDEON

Sweet.

I glance up at Gideon, whose shrug is midway between uncaring and sheepish.

“You freak me the fuck out sometimes, buddy.”

He beams. “Why, thank you.”

I glance back to the last messages in the text exchange

SEBASTIAN

KING. Giddyup, motherfucker. It’s carnage time.

CARSON

I’m good.

CARSON

Have fun.

I look up, frowning. “*That* is the cause of your concern?”

Gideon clears his throat. “It, uh…*is* out of character for Carson of all people to say no to inflicting pain and suffering on others. Like, radically.”

Hmm. He does have a point.

“Do we know where he is?”

“No, but I can guess,” Seb grumbles. “With that fucking De Luca chick.”

Shit.

Normally, I wouldn't give a flying fuck whose panties Carson is trying to get into. But Gabriella's brother Nero is…well…like us.

Utterly fucking insane. Not to mention violent, unpredictable, and powerful.

I exhale. "Okay, let me track him down and—"

My phone dings with a notification, pulling my attention to an incoming text.

EVELINA

I'd love to see you. Could you meet me today at Café Boulud?

It's ridiculous and more than a little embarrassing how quickly I respond.

ME

When?

EVELINA

11:30?

ME

Done.

Gideon is looking right at me when I glance up again.

"How about *I* find Carson. You seem…occupied."

I start to open my mouth to protest, but he shakes his head. "All good, man. Go do your thing. I'll tell Carson to keep his hands off psycho Nero's kid sister."

* * *

I GO UTTERLY STILL when my gaze slides from Evelina to the other two people sitting at the table that the host at Café Boulud just escorted me to.

Val…and *Morgan*.

My father smiles warmly if a little weakly as he stands. Yeah, he knows how I feel.

My eyes drag back to Evelina, who winces a bit as she grins at me.

If she thinks this is a cutesy surprise, she's dead fucking *wrong*.

"Vaughn," Morgan says, clearing his throat. "I just want to—"

"Nope."

I spin on my heel and start to walk away.

"C'mon, man!" Val runs in front of me and plants his hands on my chest. "Will you just stop for a second?!" He scowls at me. "It's just fucking *lunch*."

"Which I'm happy to sit down for," I growl. "Just as soon as that rat-fuck you're with vacates the premises."

His eyes narrow. "He's our *father*—"

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that."

"*Vaughn*!" he hisses. "Come the fuck on, man! Just let the guy fucking talk for three minutes without being a prick! He's trying!"

"I don't give a single shit if—"

"Hey…"

I stiffen at the touch of her hand on my arm and the soft sound of her voice. Evelina's biting her lip, looking up at me.

"If you think conning me into coming to this bullshit was cute, you're *very* fucking wrong," I spit, moving closer to her as my furious gaze burns into her.

"*Cool it*," Val snarls, trying to shove between us. "Don't talk to her like—"

"Val."

Evelina puts her hand on his shoulder and eases him to the side.

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor,” she says softly.

Val scowls.

“Yeah, away you go, *Lancelot*,” I mutter as he turns to walk back over to the table, giving me the finger over his shoulder.

Evelina sighs. When she takes my hand in hers, my mind short-circuits. Like the memory chip forgets I’m supposed to be fucking *furious* with her.

“I didn’t mean for this to be an ambush,” she says quietly, looking at me with those big, innocent, gorgeous gray eyes. “I just…look, I *get* fathers being complicated, okay? You know that.”

I frown.

“But I also know that people can change. They can be more than their addictions.” She shrugs. “I was sitting over there for maybe four minutes before you walked in, and he really seems to be trying hard.” She gives me a wry smile. “I also think it would mean a lot to Val if you came and sat for a few minutes.”

“That’s because he doesn’t…” I bite back the rest, shaking my head.

“Please?” she says gently. “For me?” She sucks her lower lip between her teeth and cranes up on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear. “*I’ll let you hurt me if you do*.”

I smirk at the hot flush on her cheeks as she drops back down. “You’d let me do that anyway,” I murmur.

She shrugs. “Really? How’s the last few days been for you?”

“*Careful*, princess,” I growl, grinning a little when she blushes even deeper. “This feels like bribery.”

“Maybe because it is,” she smiles.

I exhale and look past her to my brother and Morgan, chatting away.

“Five minutes,” I growl. “He gets *five minutes*.”

I freeze when she stretches back up on her toes, a big grin on her face, and *kisses my cheek*.

"*Thank you*," she whispers, taking my hand and leading me back to the table.

"Vaughn," Morgan beams, standing and moving toward me, his arms wide.

Yeah, he can fuck *right off* with that.

Luckily, he seems to pick up that I'm in the fucking opposite of a hugging mood, and just sticks out his hand instead.

"It's good to see you, Vaughn," he says with a warm smile.

A small elbow digs into my side. I glance down to see Evelina giving me a look and then raising her eyebrows significantly at the outstretched hand.

Goddamn, this woman.

I begrudgingly stick out a hand and give Morgan a lackluster shake.

At least he doesn't try that "son" bullshit again like last time.

My brother flashes me a quick grin as we all take our seats. Morgan exhales, grinning widely and shaking his head as he looks between me and Val.

"Still can't believe both my boys made it from McKeesport all the way to *New York freaking City*!" he exclaims. "I mean holy hell…it's hard to comprehend. I'm so proud of both of—"

"Funny," I mutter coldly, "*I* can't believe both your boys made it past the age of *nine* with the home life we endured with you and that other crackhead."

"*C'mon, man*," Val hisses. "The fuck is your—"

"No, it's okay, Val." Morgan exhales. "I deserve that. And that's not me looking for sympathy, either." He looks down at the table. "I was a shit father. Yes, I could blame the drugs, but excuses don't change the life you two had to suffer through. In Narcotics Anonymous, we talk a lot about how

excuses are just a way to shift responsibility. Excuses are a symptom of the disease we have."

"I thought you were sober," I say tightly.

Morgan nods slowly. "Eight years now."

I grit my teeth as Val puts a hand on Morgan's shoulder and squeezes. "Proud of you, Dad. I can't imagine the strength that took."

Jesus Christ.

"No, I meant that you said disease you *have*," I mutter. "Not *had*."

"An addict will always be an addict," Val says stonily as he glares at me. "The trick is not to be an addict that uses."

Morgan clears his throat and turns to Evelina. "Ms. Nikitin here was just telling me before you arrived that her brother, Val's special guy, is in the program, too?"

"Isn't it Alcoholics *Anonymous*?" I say waspishly.

Evelina kicks my shin under the table, then smiles at Morgan.

"He is, Mr. Bancroft. Six months sober. I'm—" She smiles again and nods at my brother. "We're both really proud of him."

Morgan shakes his head. "That's incredible. Good for him. It took me four years to achieve six unbroken months of sobriety," he sighs.

"How'd you do it?" Val asks.

"A lot of hard work, self-reflection, commitment, and a desire to overcome something bigger than myself."

"Huh," I mutter. "So I guess you did have the wherewithal to be a decent fucking parent in you. You just didn't bother to use it until it was about *yourself*, not your children."

Evelina turns and frowns at me. Val shoots me a venomous look.

Morgan exhales. "I understand that you've got a lot of anger, son."

Mother. Fucker.

“I told you,” I growl, pointing a finger at him, “*not* to fucking call me that.”

“Vaughn…” Evelina says warningly as she puts her hand on my arm.

I shake my head, looking between her and my brother. “I know you both think I’m just being a prick. But *you*,” I look at Evelina, “weren’t there, and *you*,” I turn to Val, “don’t remember.” I point violently across the table at Morgan. “The apologies are nice. The sobriety is peachy. But the *hell* this fucker put the two of us through is *not* something I’m going to roll over and fucking *forget*, okay?!”

“Vaughn—”

“Shut the *fuck* up,” I snarl at Morgan. “You might be able pull the wool over Val's eyes, because his amnesia stops him from remembering the truth. Hell, maybe you were so fucked up all the time you don’t even recall yourself. But I haven’t forgotten *any* of it,” I snap viciously. “You want to tell my brother here about the time one of your meth-head buddies pulled his dick out and tried to corner him in the bathroom?”

Morgan’s face pales.

“You want to tell him how you just sat there on the couch *laughing* at fuck-knows-what while I beat his fucking teeth in with the handle of the toilet plunger?! Oh, I know. How about the time mom was all fucked up and accused me of stealing her Oxy? Remember that, *Dad*?!”

I violently shrug off my jacket, undo my sleeve button, and yank my shirt up over my forearm.

“Remember how she put cigarettes out on me until I *admitted* to selling the fuckin’ pills, even though she was the one who'd done them all and just *forgot*?” I smile coldly, running a fingertip over the scars on my inner forearm. “Do you remember how you did nothing and just *watched*?!”

The table is silent. Fuck, the ones *around us* are.

Val swallows, his face white as he looks at me. “Hey, Vaughn—”

“You want more?” I grin maniacally as Demon shifts inside me. Snarls. And comes charging out.

Fuck.

“Yeah, let’s do some more!” I yell with a crazy-ass smile on my face. “We’ve got—” I frown. “*I’ve* got plenty.” I stab my gaze across the table at Morgan, whose face is now a mask of horror. “How ‘bout it, *Pop*? Think Val wants to replay the Christmas where you unwrapped all the presents on Christmas Eve *in front of us* and then took off to go sell them for heroin?”

“*Vaughn*—” he croaks.

But we’re not done. We’re just getting fucking started.

Settle down. You can’t be here.

Oh, we’re fucking HERE, motherfucker. Let’s fucking goooo.

“How about the time you made me drink vodka until I puked because you thought it was *funny*?” I choke. “Or the times you had me hold your tie-off while you shot up? Oh, and lest we forget, there was that fun day when you came home early and Mom was still fucking one of her Johns on the couch while I kept pillows over Val's ears so he wouldn't hear.” I glare death at him. “And then you two started screaming at each other, and I walked out and told you that you were scaring Val, and you punched *me* in the face for my pains.”

Morgan is silent, staring at me with a faraway look in his eye.

“*I was fucking EIGHT YEARS OLD, MOTHERFUCKER!*”

The whole fucking restaurant is silent now, and staring.

I whirl on my brother. “And you wonder why I want *fuck-all* to do with this asshole?!” I choke. “You wonder why I’m ‘not trying’?!”

I spin to Evelina. “You starting to get why it wasn’t fucking *cute* to ambush me with this fucking shit?!”

Her face crumples. I look away and laser focus my rage on Morgan.

“You find it *hard to comprehend* that we made it to New York?” I bark out a cold, brutal laugh. “Motherfucker, I find it hard to comprehend that I’m *alive* after being so unfortune to be born as your fucking kid! You have no *idea* the shit I did to make sure Val and I survived in a world that wanted to grind us under its heel.” I shake my head at him. “Keep your apologies. Keep your fucking sobriety and your sanctimonious self-fucking-forgiveness. I’m not your redemption arc, I’m not your fucking Hallmark holiday movie, I’m your *child*,” I seethe. “And when Val and I needed you to own that responsibility, you threw us to the fucking wolves.”

It feels like the entire *world* is silent as Demon slinks back into the shadows.

Morgan looks…empty. Shattered. Broken.

Good.

But Val does too. That’s…not.

I turn to him. “I…I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” he murmurs. Then he stands. I can see the war on his face as he turns to our father. “This isn’t me saying goodbye, Morgan. But I do need some space to absorb this.”

Morgan looks up at my brother with pain in his eyes. “*I’m so sorry, Val*,” he chokes. “I’m *so fucking sorry.*”

Val nods. Then he turns to me. He doesn’t say anything, just drops a hand to my shoulder and squeezes.

Then he walks out.

My gaze shifts back to Morgan.

“He’s been through *a lot*,” I hiss. “Nightmare after nightmare. Devil after devil. Some of them I could fight off, others I couldn’t. But you?” I shake my head. “I *will* fight you off before I let you fuck with him anymore. Is that understood?”

He nods.

A hand lands gently on my arm, and I turn to see Evelina looking at me with tears trickling down her cheeks.

“Mr. Bancroft,” she chokes, glancing at Morgan. “I’m sorry, but we have to go.”

I’m only vaguely aware of her standing with me, taking my hand, and leading me out of the restaurant.

“Is this the part where you tell me I acted insane and that I don’t understand complicated relationships with fathers?” I growl when we step outside into the noise of the city.

“*No,*” she chokes. She twists, grabs my shirt, and pulls me down close, her eyes searching mine. “This is the part where I tell you I’m so fucking sorry. This is the part where I tell you I’m here for you, with whatever you need.”

And then she kisses me.

And God-fucking-damnit, everything else just sort of fades away.

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EVELINA

"*I'm so sorry*."

Vaughn is motionless in the living room as he grips the back of the leather chair. His head is bowed, his shoulders tense.

I swallow the lump in my throat as I walk a little closer to him.

"I…" I shake my head. "Vaughn, I had no idea it would be like that. I didn't know…your life back then…"

He slowly turns to face me, and a cold shiver ripples down my spine at the raw pain and anger on his face. His eyes look *haunted* as he grits his teeth, shaking.

"*How*," he rasps out, the ice in his blue eyes fracturing like shattered glass. "How do you have any *possible* forgiveness for your father after what he put you and your family through?"

I wince.

"After what he did to your brother?" he chokes. "To *mine*?!"

I shudder as a tear slides down my cheek. "*I'm sorry*—"

"I don't want you to fucking apologize," he says tightly. But there's no malice in his voice, and when I really take in the emotions on his face, I realize he's not furious and vengeful.

It's an actual question.

“*Genuinely*,” he says, his voice thick as he swallows. “How the *fuck* do you forgive someone for putting you through something like that? How do you reconcile shit like *that* against that person whose supposed to be your fucking parent?”

“*I don’t know*,” I whisper. “Just—he's my dad. I can’t hate him.”

Vaughn exhales and then walks around to lower himself heavily into the chair. Without a word, I cross the room and sit on the arm of it. Then his arm slides around my waist, pulling me into his lap.

“I—” I wince. “I thought…I mean, I *did* think ambushing you would be this silly thing where you’d begrudgingly have lunch with him. I'm so sorry.”

“You didn’t know,” he growls. “How would you. Val doesn’t *remember* it, and I don’t share that part of my life with anyone.”

His phone buzzes. He sighs heavily, then reaches into his jacket pocket to pull it out. I’m not *trying* to snoop, but I can’t help but see “Sabine” on the screen.

“Not even with *Sabine*?” I say tightly.

He turns to me. “That sounds like jealousy, princess.”

I look away. “Look, I know we’re not…*whatever*. But you have this girl who sometimes lives with you, who *hates* me—no, she really does—and who obviously adores you.”

“And that makes you jealous.”

“*Yes*,” I finally snap, turning back to him. “Yes, it makes me jealous.”

He looks at me carefully. “Should I be jealous of Roman?”

My brow furrows. “What?”

“Have you ever fucked him?”

My face wrinkles. “*Ew. Obviously* not.”

“Well, there you go,” he shrugs. “I have about as much interest in sleeping with or doing anything romantic with Sabine as you do with Roman.”

My mouth purses.

Vaughn sighs. “Just say it.”

“What?” I mutter.

“Whatever you’re thinking. Spit it out.”

I huff. “Fine. Do you seriously believe that she lost her phone right before someone lured me out of the theater on campus and then tried to kill me?”

“Nope.”

I stare at him. “*What*?!”

He shrugs. “No, I don’t believe that.”

My jaw drops. “So she’s working with—”

“No,” he shakes his head. “She’s not. Do I think Sabine tried to sabotage us meeting up by texting you *herself* that I wanted you to go back to the city?” He shrugs. “Yes. But there’s zero chance she was working with that motherfucker who tried to hurt you later. I think another enemy of mine capitalized on the sheer bad luck of finding you walking outside alone that night.”

My jaw drops. “*Bad luck?* Vaughn, the timing—”

“Sabine’s guilty of being dangerously overprotective and more than a little selfish when it comes to me. Not of conspiring to get you hurt or killed. She didn’t say anything afterward because she knew how it would look.”

I shake my head slowly. “You really believe that.”

“Sabine’s like a sister to me, Evelina,” he growls. “Her father, Stellan, was my mentor. Two years ago, he was killed in a bomb blast orchestrated by Diego Torvallés. The same blast paralyzed Sabine and put her in that wheelchair.”

My face falls, my heart clenching as he takes my hand.

“*That* is why she and I are so close. It’s why I take care of her, why she lives with me sometimes…” He smiles wryly. “For the record, she doesn’t

know about my childhood, either. No one except Val and Morgan know that." His hand tightens around mine. "And now you."

I squeeze his hand back.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper. "About what happened to Stellan, and Sabine."

He nods.

"Is that why you killed Andrés? Payback?"

His mouth twists into a small smile.

"What I did in those woods was because he put his hands on you," he says. "Because he was trying to hurt you."

I don't know what makes me do it. But one second, I'm sitting in his lap, holding his hand, and the next, I'm cupping his face and kissing him.

"Can we please clear the air?" I murmur as I pull back. "I mean, between my disaster of a lunch surprise and not understanding your relationship with Sabine…" I sigh. "Can we do dinner tonight? Just you and me?"

Vaughn's brow arches. "That sounds suspiciously like a date, princess."

"And if it is?"

He frowns. "Evelina, I don't do da—"

"Then don't *call* it a date," I grin, biting my lip and poking his firm chest.

He glares at me. But then I see the frost cracking around the edges as his lips curl into a quiet smirk.

I grin. "I'm getting to you, aren't I?"

* * *

SILENCE FOLLOWS the ring of the buzzer as I pull my hand back. I've decided to continue on my quest of clearing the air and pay someone a little visit at home before my don't-call-it-a-date with Vaughn.

“Hello?” Sabine’s voice calls through the intercom.

She does stay at Vaughn’s penthouse from time to time. And she really does like his mansion up in the Adirondacks. But she also has her own place on the Upper West Side now, near the Columbia University campus.

That’s where I am.

“Hey, Sabine?” I clear my throat. “It’s Evie.” I frown. “Um, Evelina? Nikitin?”

The intercom goes silent for a long moment.

“What do you want?”

Well, this is going *awesome*.

“I was just in the neighborhood, and—”

“How did you find out where I live?”

I smile. “Our…mutual friend?”

She sighs heavily.

“Look, I just…” I frown. “I think we got off on the wrong foot—”

“Is that meant to be a fucking wheelchair joke, asshole?” she snaps.

Shit.

“No!” I blurt. “I’m sorry, terrible choice of words. I’m just…nervous, I think?” I sigh. “Can I come in? I really do just want to talk.”

Another long silence.

“Give me a minute.”

I step away from the intercom, grinning and nervously tapping my foot. Finally, the door buzzes and unlocks, and I step inside.

Sabine’s door is open when I get off the elevator upstairs. I walk into a super cool, artsy space with brick walls, big factory windows, and steps leading up to a lofted area.

“Wow,” I whistle, looking around as I shut the door behind me. “This place is amazing. That *loft*!”

Sabine is turned to face me by a lowered sitting/standing desk near the windows. “Yeah, the stairs up to the loft come in *very* handy,” she says dryly.

I smile awkwardly before I nod to the lofted area. “Do you have guests a lot?”

“If I do?” she snaps.

I frown. “Sorry, I wasn’t…I just mean, the bed up there…?”

“Yeah,” she finally says. “I have friends who stay over sometimes.”

I nod, turning to look around her space again.

“Why are you so nervous?” she asks, cocking a brow at me.

I sigh. “Look, I know you didn’t lose your phone that night.”

She frowns. “Yes, I—”

“And Vaughn does, too.”

Her mouth snaps shut, her face paling.

“But he also knows you didn’t have anything to do with what happened after I left the theater.”

Her lips purse. “What do *you* think?”

I smile. “I think if he of all people trusts someone, I probably should, too.”

Her eyes drop to her lap.

“Look, I know you don’t like me, because you’re so protective of him. I get it,” I continue. “I’ve been like that my whole life with my big brother, Roman. Even when he was coming out and falling in love with a close friend of mine, I was *suspicious* of that friend’s intentions. I mean, Val is literally one of my besties, and I was *still* second guessing why he was with

Roman.” I smile wryly. “I love him, and you worry about the people you love. You protect them, even if it makes you come off as a little crazy.”

Sabine eyes me. “Are you saying I come off as a little crazy?”

“*Yeah*, girl,” I blurt, laughing a little, then again when I see her biting back a smile of her own. “But I get why, and…” I shrug. “I just wanted you to know that.”

She inhales slowly, drumming her fingers on the arm of her wheelchair. “So… What *are* your intentions with Vaughn?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I sigh. “I wish I had a better answer for you. But I *can* tell you… I really like him. I feel safe with him. I feel seen and heard in a way I’ve never been before. I miss him when I’m not around him. I think about him when we’re apart. And I feel whole when we’re together.”

My eyes widen as I realize the full gravity of what I’ve just said.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “That was…”

“A little crazy?” she smirks.

I nod. “Maybe a little.”

Sabine’s brows knit. “I’m sorry I sent that text. I truly, *truly* had no idea—”

“Think we could start over?” I say hopefully.

“Depends. Do you think it’s too early for a glass of wine?”

I eye her wryly. “Is this the part where you pretend to be my friend and drug me again?”

She squirms and turns red, but then we both laugh.

“But, no,” I shake my head. “Not too early.”

“You can even pour if it’ll make you feel better,” she grins. “In the fridge,” she adds, nodding past me.

I walk around the corner of the loft and into the kitchen area. I find some Chardonnay in the fridge, and glasses in a cabinet. My brows knit as I set

them on the regular height counter and pour the wine.

“How long have you had this place?” I call out.

“A bit more than a month,” she calls back. “Vaughn also found all these crazy doorman buildings with billionaire views. Don’t get me wrong, they're *beautiful*, and I like crashing at his place every now and then for those views. But I don’t know. I really liked this place.”

“Does he come by a lot?” I ask, walking back over and handing her some wine.

“Mr. Nonstop?” She rolls her eyes. “No. I’m actually not sure he ever has.”

I think about the counters in this apartment that she loves so much, and how Vaughn hasn’t ever *seen* those counters through her eyes.

A little light goes on in my head.

I think I know how to prove my good intentions to Sabine.

“Can I ask you something, Evie? How involved are you with the day-to-day stuff with your family's business?”

I snort. “What?”

She gives me a puzzled look. “Like, how does Roman balance your ideas with his own leadership?”

I give her a strange look. “Oh, I’m…I’m not involved at all.”

Her brow furrows. “Really?”

I shrug. “I mean, I understand what my family does, and sometimes Roman lets me know about stuff before it happens. But he's in charge.” I roll my eyes. “I’m just the kid sister.”

Sabine’s lips twist. “That’s…wow… “

“What?”

“No, it’s just…you’re obviously smart, and you’re really good at analyzing situations and reading between the lines. I guess I just imagined that would

be something your brother would consider an asset to the family."

"Oh, I dunno about that…" I shrug.

"Well, I do." She sips her wine. "I'm just saying, once you're in the Syndicate?" She gives me a sharp look. "Your intuition and subtle understanding will be valued, and I'm not just blowing smoke up your ass." She giggles. "Seriously."

I stay for an hour, both of us chatting and laughing, until I decide I was wrong about her. Or maybe I was right when I first met her, and then wrong for a while.

Either way, I'm glad I came over.

"Hey, Evelina?" She smiles as she holds the door open for me as I'm leaving. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For having the guts to force this thing between us to a head. I never would have." She grins. "And for what it's worth, I think you might be really good for him."

* * *

THERE'S a huge weight off my shoulders as I float into the restaurant on Vaughn's arm. The food is amazing, the wine delicious. The company is hot and broody and orders me to take off my panties halfway through our appetizers and hand them to him.

After we get back to his penthouse he turns off the lights, chases me, pins me roughly to the glass overlooking the city with a knife to my throat, and fucks the living shit out of me as I come all over his thick cock again and again.

Later, I'm about to head to the guest room. But then, without a word, Vaughn grabs my hand and leads me to his bedroom.

He pulls back the covers of his bed.

…And tells me to “just shut up and get in already” when I arch a brow.

For the very first time, I fall asleep in his arms in his bed, snuggled against him.

It’s dark when I wake up. I can hear yelling.

I frown as I lift my head from the pillow. The bed beside me is empty.

“Vaughn?”

The yelling comes again, louder, from the living area.

I swing my legs out from the covers and wrap the duvet around me. Slowly, cautiously, I creep across the bedroom and crack open the door.

The yelling is even louder now, and it’s definitely Vaughn’s voice.

I tell myself he must be on a business call and turn to go back to bed.

“She’s not going anywhere!” he thunders.

I pause at the open doorway.

“She’s making us *weak*.”

I shiver. That was his voice. But...*not*. Harsher. Colder. Almost a little inhuman.

“I won't let you take her away,” Vaughn snarls.

“*You* won't let *us*!?” his altered voice barks in reply. “The fucking *audacity* to think there even *is* a you without us!”

A chill ripples up my spine.

What the fuck is going on?

I slowly push the bedroom door open and tiptoe down the hall. The yelling continues as the darkness of the corridor lightens and I approach the landing that overlooks the open living area below.

“There is no YOU!” the demonic voice roars. “There is only WE! And WE say that she needs to fucking go!”

“I will cut you out,” Vaughn snarls.

Then his other voice laughs.

“You’d have to kill yourself if you wanted to do *that*, motherfucker.”

“Guess we’ll find out together, won’t we?” Vaughn barks.

There’s a clatter of metal and then the sound of shattering glass. My heart lurches as I bolt down the hall, glancing over the rail of the landing to see him falling, or maybe being yanked, around the corner and out of view.

“VAUGHN!”

I rush down the stairs, sprint around the corner…

And then I’m not sure what I'm looking at, but it scares the hell out of me.

Vaughn is on his knees in the kitchen, a dazed look in his eyes as he struggles with himself, his arm muscles bulging as he points the tip of a large kitchen knife to his own jugular.

“*THERE IS NO YOU WITHOUT WE!*” he roars in the terrifying voice I’ve never heard before.

Then he touches the knife to his skin.

“NO!” I scream, hurling myself across the kitchen at him and dropping to my knees. “STOP IT!”

He starts as I grab the knife, yank it from his grip, and fling it across the room.

“VAUGHN!” I blurt, cupping his face, trying to pierce through the demonic, vicious glint in his eyes. “Vaughn, it’s *me*! Evie! You’re home! You’re safe!”

“*THERE IS NO YOU WITHOUT—*”

My palm cracks sharply against his face. Suddenly, with a choked gasp, his gaze returns to normal.

The cold sneer on his face drops, and he blinks rapidly, his brow furrowed as he focuses on me.

His eyes dart to the knife on the floor across the room before his gaze drags back to me.

"*Evelina*," he chokes.

Tears spring to my eyes as I wrap my arms around him, hugging him tightly as I cry into his shoulder.

"*I see you*," I sob, my breath catching as I hug him so tight it hurts. "*I'm here, and I see you.*"

I have no idea what the hell that was just now.

But I do know that I'm not going anywhere.

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EVELINA

"I NEED to ask you something, Evie."

My phone is pinched between my ear and my shoulder as I juggle a coffee and my dance bag while making my way down the alley behind the Mercury.

"Hang on, I'm…ahhh, *crap!*" I yelp as hot coffee spills from the to-go cup and scalds my hand.

Roman sighs. "Never mind. If you're busy, we can talk later."

"No, it's fine, I'm just…one sec."

When I finally get to the back door, I shrug my bag off my shoulder, set the coffee down on the fire escape, and take a deep breath.

"Sorry, Rome, I'm a hot mess this morning." I frown. "What's going on?"

My brother clears his throat but doesn't say anything.

"Uhh…Roman?"

"How was your sleepover at Milena's?"

God, I hate lying.

For the last two weeks, since I walked in on whatever it was that I saw in Vaughn's kitchen, I've been staying at his place.

In his bed.

With him.

I *love* that that’s my new reality. We do normal, regular people stuff like eat dinner together or watch dumb TV shows on the couch.

Then, obviously, we do the not-so-regular people stuff: aka, have brutally rough, violent, sadistic sex.

I’m *always* sore and bruised.

And I wouldn’t change a thing.

But underneath it all is the reason I’ve started insisting on always spending the night with him, i.e., that night in the kitchen.

He doesn't talk about it. Or if he does, he's not telling me the whole truth. He said he was probably having a nightmare, and that he sometimes sleepwalks. But there’s sleepwalking and making yourself a sandwich, and there’s sleepwalking and screaming at yourself while holding a knife to your own throat.

I’m spending every night with him because the idea of leaving him alone terrifies me.

But when you don't sleep in your own bed for two weeks and you share a house with your overprotective big brother…well…here we are.

I’ve been lying nonstop, telling him I’m spending the night at various friends' houses. But there’s a limit to believability, and we’re a good week past that point.

“It was…fun?” I squeak.

“Evie.”

I swallow. “M-hmm?”

“Where did you sleep last night.”

My chest tightens. “Milena's.”

“Nero came home early from his business trip to surprise Milena last night.”

Shit.

“I had coffee with him this morning and, oddly, he didn’t mention any unexpected house guests when he got home. So…want to tell me the truth?”

Not particularly.

“Where the hell were you, Eves?”

My brow furrows, frustration rustling in my nerves. “Look, Rome, I appreciate the concern but not the accusation,” I say tightly.

“Evie—”

“I’ve been seeing someone, okay?”

“*Jesus*,” he hisses.

I exhale. “Roman, I’m twenty-three years old.”

“Define *seeing someone*.”

“It means what you think!” I snap. “Roman, I’m not a kid. I mean, give me a freaking break! At *some point* I was going to have a relationship with someone!”

“So why the fuck have you been lying to me about—”

“Because I knew you’d get all psycho overprotective!” I yell.

“It’s my fucking job to—”

“Not anymore!” I snap.

The line goes utterly silent for a moment.

“*Who*,” he finally mutters. “Who the fuck is it?”

I stare. “How about none of your business?”

“Excuse me…”

I exhale sharply. “Roman, I’m a twenty-three-year-old woman. Whom I date *or sleep with* is truly none of your business. I say that with love.”

Roman swears under his breath, then sighs. “I know,” he says quietly. “It’s just… It’s hard to disengage overprotective big brother mode.”

I smile wryly. “Understood.”

He chuckles. “Guess I just proved why you’ve been bullshitting me about where you’ve been the last few nights.”

I grin.

“So…it’s serious?”

I swallow, nodding. “Yeah,” I murmur.

“And when do I get to meet this fucker?”

Never.

“Can I…think about that?”

“That’s not a huge reassurance on who the asshole is,” he growls.

I roll my eyes. “You trust me, right? Can you please just trust that I’m okay, making good decisions, and happy? Can we start with that?”

“*Fine*,” he grumbles. “I guess. But you need to promise me a few things.”

“Such as?”

“Does he treat you well?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Are you safe with him?”

“Extremely.”

My brother clears his throat. “And…you're happy?”

“*Very*,” I smile.

“Then I guess I’m satisfied,” he grunts. “*For now*.”

“Thank goodness,” I snicker.

“Okay, I need to take off—”

“Hey, Rome?”

“Yeah.”

“What would you think about me…” I shrug. “I don’t know…sitting in on some of your meetings?”

Roman snorts. “What?”

“Do you think I could attend some of the meetings?” I repeat.

“Uh…” He clears his throat. “Why?”

“I mean…” I shrug. “It *is* a family business, and I *am* a member of that family. Maybe I should be more abreast of what’s going on.”

Roman chuckles. “Evie, of course you’re part of this family. But, I mean… Isn’t dance your thing?”

I scowl. “Yeah. But this could *also* be my thing. Is that a problem?”

“No,” he says quickly. “No, of course not. But…”

I scowl. “*But*?”

“I’d need some time, Evie.”

My brow furrows. “Why?”

“C’mon, Eves. Yeah, I’m the boss, but I’m the *new* boss. The new *gay* boss.”

“Roman, your top guys have made it clear they don’t care about that.”

“Yeah, well, there’s the way people talk and then the way they act,” he growls. “I’m still shoring up the foundation of my throne. I’m not saying *no*, obviously. But… It’s not like you’ve got any experience with bratva shit, you know?”

“*Okay*, but again, it’s my family business. I was raised in it, Roman. All I’m asking for is a foot in the door.”

He exhales. “Look, I’m *not saying no*. Just…can you give me some time?”

“Yeah,” I mumble, sighing. “Yeah, of course. Thanks, Rome.”

* * *

“I ALMOST DON’T WANT to ask what you’re doing. The view is too nice.”

I gasp at the sound of his voice behind me and start to zip my hoodie back up.

“Uh-uh-*uh*,” Vaughn murmurs, crossing the bathroom floor to where I’ve been standing topless facing the floor-length mirror. “Don’t even think about it.”

I grin, biting my lip and flushing all over as he wraps his arms around me from behind and pulls the hoodie back open, revealing my bare torso. A soft hum starts in my throat as his large hands slide up my ribs to cup my breasts.

“Okay, *now* I'll ask what you’re doing,” he growls into my ear.

My cheeks flush.

“I was…thinking about where it might go.”

Time flies when you’re having fun. When you’re being chased, and grabbed, and brutalized, and choked, and slapped, and fucked to within an inch of your life on a nightly basis by a gorgeous, intensely captivating villain of a man.

When you’re falling head over heels for that man.

It’s been just shy of three months since that first initiation at Blackbriar Hall. Soon, in another shadowy ceremony there, I, together with the remaining Acolytes, will pledge myself entirely to the Syndicate, and get its

mark—the upside-down dagger surround by a halo of light—tattooed on my skin.

“W-where do you think it should go?” I ask with a shiver as Vaughn’s thumbs brush my tight nipples in the mirror.

His hands still, and his brow furrows.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” he murmurs.

I twist in his arms, turning to face him. “What?”

“Evelina, the Syndicate is for life—”

“Vaughn,” I say quietly. “I know what I’m signing up for.”

“My worry is that you don’t,” he growls. “And that you’re still only doing this for *your father*.” His jaw ticks. “I could pull some strings, maybe, outside the Syndicate…”

“You could do that?”

“I could.”

My brow furrows. “But the Syndicate is *clear* on only helping its own—”

“I’d help you anyway.”

I frown a little deeper. He’s already told me about the internal friction with some of the older higher-ups who’ve clung to their loyalty to the previous Marquis. And I know that "friction" is more than just arguments in boardrooms.

“That would put you in a really hard place,” I whisper.

He lifts his shoulders. “It wouldn’t.”

“*Vaughn—*”

“Fine, let me rephrase: it might, but I wouldn’t give a fuck.”

I sigh. “And how bad would that look? The Marquis casually defying the rules of a centuries-old organization to help his *girlfriend*?”

My mouth snaps shut instantly.

Crap.

“Girlfriend, hmm?”

I groan. “I was just talking about the PR perspective of it. I know I’m not—”

“Evelina—”

“—and you don’t do relationships, and I am *not* asking that, and—”

“Evelina, would you stop—”

“—seriously, just forget it, that was really stupid—”

He cups my jaw firmly, forcing my gaze to his.

“*Don’t ever call my girlfriend stupid*,” he growls, smirking.

I grin, my cheeks heating.

“And…what does that mean?” I ask hesitantly.

“It means what you already know, princess,” he murmurs. “That you’re *mine*.”

His lips sear to mine, kissing me deeply and taking my breath away. But when he pulls back, he's frowning.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I’m still worried that you’re only joining because of your father.”

I swallow. “Not *just* him, but—”

“I have to show you something,” he says quietly. He takes my hands, his face darkening. “You need to see it before you commit to the Syndicate. Come.”

He leads me back into the bedroom, where his laptop is open on the desk near the windows. He sits at it, pulling me into his lap, then opens a folder on the laptop and pauses.

“You don’t need to go through with this for me,” he rumbles, his hand sliding up my cheek as his piercing eyes lock with mine. “You can stop all of this, and I won’t be going anywhere. But I need you to see this before you commit to the Syndicate.”

My heart is still jumping in my chest from that as he clicks on a subfolder to reveal a list of thumbnail photos.

“These were taken by a spy of mine embedded in the Minsky Bratva, out of Moscow.” His eyes dart to mine. “I assume you know them?”

I do.

The Minsky Bratva, led by Grigori Minksy, is a *seriously* powerful family in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

“So… What are these?”

Vaughn says nothing as he turns and double clicks, opening the series of photos. My eyes widen at the very first image that pops up on the screen.

It’s my father, looking drunk, laughing with a glass of vodka in his hand. He’s in a tailored suit, sitting at a lavish restaurant table with a glamorous woman in his lap, and he’s toasting the grinning man sitting next to him, the two of them appearing to be best buddies.

The other man is Grigori Minksy.

“Turns out,” Vaughn says quietly, “that your father *didn’t* end up in Moscow with nothing of value. He’s just cut a massive deal with Grigori: he’s told the Minsky Bratva about *all* his old Russian connections, smuggling routes, and intel. In exchange, Grigori’s made him a partner and top *avtoritet* in the Minsky Bratva.”

My jaw drops.

“Your father is untouchable now,” Vaughn growls. “Protected, vouched for, completely taken care of.” He exhales slowly, turning to me. “You don’t have to do this, Evelina,” he says. “You don’t need me or the Syndicate’s help anymore.”

I sit there in silence, my heart twisting.

I *just* talked to him a few weeks ago.

“How…” I frown. “How long would something like this take to set up?”

Vaughn frowns. “With *Minsky*? Guy's a paranoid lunatic. Months, I’m betting.”

Months.

My father *was already setting this up* when I told him I was putting myself in danger and going against the entire family to give him help he no longer needed.

Fuck.

“If I *did* join anyway,” I say, “what exactly would be my role in the Syndicate?”

His eyes spark wickedly. “Do you mean other than being my personal fuck toy and cum slut?”

Heat explodes across my face.

“*Aside* from that,” I murmur, blushing furiously and then gasping when his hand tightens on my hip. “I mean, for real.”

He nods slowly. “The only limit within the Syndicate is ambition. I mean, yes, personal relationships matter—it’s no accident that my closest friends are my inner circle. But they’re also the only people I’d trust *in* that capacity.” He peers at me closely. “What would you want out of the Syndicate?”

I scoff. “Head assassin, obviously.”

He grins. “You do have a mean streak.”

“I don’t know…” I shrug. “I feel like I’m kind of good at reading people—”

“*Kind of*?” He smiles at me. “You’re a genius at it.”

I wink at him. “You’re just saying that because I’m topless.”

He shakes his head. “I’m *saying* that because you’ve got a gift for seeing the unseen and reading between the lines.” His brow furrows. “The Syndicate isn’t like other mafia organizations, where whose kid you are or your birth order is important. We value skill, ambition, and commitment, and we want people who have the aptitude and drive to lead.”

Vaughn’s hand lifts to my chin. “Is that what you want to do, princess? Lead?”

I smile wryly. “Maybe?” I mumble. “I don’t know, it’s kinda stupid—”

“I told you not to call my girlfriend stupid,” he growls.

I giggle. “Maybe not *lead*. That sounds like a pain.”

“It *really* is,” he groans.

“But maybe *helping* leadership? Like advising?” I roll my eyes. “Or, you know, just head ballerina. I could dance at Syndicate parties,” I say dryly.

Vaughn smiles, dragging his thumb just under my lower lip. “You’re a truly gifted dancer, princess,” he murmurs. “But I know you’re capable of *many* other things, too.”

Heat and happiness ripple through my body as I press my lips to his.

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EVELINA

THREE DAYS LATER, I'm back at Blackbriar Hall, standing in the same ballroom with the glass ceiling as the night of the first initiation.

The night he chased me through the graveyard and fucked me for the first time.

I was so nervous that night. I'm nervous tonight, too, but it's not the same.

I'm not the same.

I don't just mean because of the changes to my sex life—i.e., going from *not having one* to participating eagerly in things that verge on insanity.

I've changed. I've found strength and a spine I didn't realize I had. I've found a power in me that I hid from before.

Vaughn might be the catalyst. But a lot of these changes are because of *me*.

I'm proud of that.

I turn to glance at the figure standing next to me in the dim, candlelit hall, my eyes shadowed by the mask covering the top half of my face. She grins nervously, her own green eyes glinting as she looks at me, shivering nervously.

Gabriella and I are *way* overdue for a catch-up. And even though it's supposed to be a secret, I'm sure that her Adept is Carson King. I have *questions*, for sure…

But now isn’t the time.

Tonight, the dais at the head of the room has seven black padded tables on it, each with a small table full of bottles and instruments next to it.

Tattoo stations.

I swallow nervously.

This is really happening.

A bell chimes, and the room goes still. A door to the side of the dais opens, and that same man in red robes and a Bauta mask steps out, staff in hand.

“Congratulations to you all,” the man announces quietly. “You have proven yourselves willing to give yourselves over to this ancient brotherhood and been deemed worthy. From tonight, you will wear that worth on your skin.”

Vaughn’s already explained to me that there’s going to be a celebration later. But this moment, where each Acolyte takes that final step and pledges fealty to the Syndicate with proof of that pledge inked on their body, is a somber one.

I swallow and glance up at the shadowy second-floor landing that rings the hall. I can’t see him, but I know Vaughn is up there.

I can *feel* him looking back at me, and it sparks a strength inside me.

“We will begin,” the man intones solemnly. “Hamza Zayd. Approach the dais and summon your Acolyte to lifelong service.”

I watch transfixed as the first Adept, a tall, built guy with deeply bronzed Middle Eastern skin, steps onto the dais and calls his Acolyte by name. The equally tall Acolyte—Liam—shakes his Adept’s hand firmly and then removes his shirt, revealing a wall of muscle. He sits on the edge of the first tattooing table, and Hamza applies the stencil to Liam’s chest. The tattoo gun buzzes to life, and Liam grits his teeth as Hamza begins to ink the dagger into his skin.

An Italian-looking guy named Gio who’s already covered in tattoos is next, rolling his sleeve up to the shoulder to get his mark on a blank spot on his

triceps. The third Acolyte, an all-American blond quarterback type, gets his ink on his thigh. The fourth and fifth both get them on their arms.

“Carson King,” the man in the red robes murmurs.

Carson steps onto the dais, a somewhat manic grin on his face. “*Gabriella De Luca*,” he murmurs darkly. “It’s that time.”

Gabriella swallows thickly. She glances my way with a small smile before she slowly makes her way to the dais. She visibly shivers when Carson slides his hand over her hip as she brushes past him.

Oh, I *do* have questions…

I watch as she lies face-down on the padded table and nods at something Carson says that I can’t hear. He unzips the back of her top and peels it away, exposing her bare shoulders and back. He lays the stencil on the back of her left shoulder blade, then turns on the tattoo gun.

The nerves I was expecting finally hit me all at once as I watch her face crumple a little, her teeth biting down on her lip as a halting whimper echoes from her throat. Carson takes his time, hovering over her and slowly tracing each line of the stencil in smooth, unhurried strokes, until the whole thing is laid down.

Gabby is shaking when she sits up, holding her top to her chest as Carson bandages her new ink and then whispers in her ear again, making her shudder.

So many questions…

They leave the dais.

Silence bathes the dark ballroom, now empty except for *me*.

“Marquis,” the man in red growls through his mask. “Please call your Acolyte.”

Electricity ripples over me as Vaughn slowly comes down from the second-floor balcony in his black Bauta mask with green filigree and steps onto the dais.

“Evelina Nikitin,” he murmurs.

Our eyes meet as I walk toward him. He takes my hand as I step up, guiding me to the last padded table.

“I’ll be right here,” he growls against my shoulder.

There’s no last-minute “are you sure about this”. I love that.

I lie on my back and lift my shirt up to just under my left breast. He already knows that my mark is going to go high on my ribs. I know it’s *really* going to fucking hurt, especially as it's my first tattoo.

That's okay. I want it to hurt.

I want it to matter.

Vaughn places the stencil, making my skin prickle. The mechanical whine of the gun hums through the room as he leans over me, his eyes locked with mine.

“I’m right here,” he says again. Then his eyes drop to the stencil as he brings the gun to my skin.

Holy fuck.

It fucking *kills*. Tears well in my eyes, and every nerve in my body screams for mercy as Vaughn’s hand steadily drags the tattoo gun over my ribs.

But I don’t look away. I stare right into his eyes as he inks the mark of the Syndicate into my skin.

I can barely stand when it’s over. But he’s right there, just as he promised, steadying me as he gently bandages the fresh tattoo and then carefully pulls my shirt back down over it. His hand takes mine, and the other one cups my face.

Then he leans in and crushes his mouth to mine, kissing me fiercely.

“*No going back now, princess*.”

* * *

“SERIOUSLY, how fucking much did that *hurt*?! I mean, *fuck*!”

Gabby is drunk. I mean, *I’m* buzzed, too. But that’s kind of the point.

Two nights after the ceremony at Blackbriar Hall, we’re all at a party in the private room of a midtown club. The place is packed with Syndicate members and all the recent initiates, who are proudly showing off their new ink and knocking back drinks with their Syndicate brothers and sisters.

“*So* fucking much,” I groan. “It still hurts.”

She giggles. “Girl, ribs were *a choice*. I’ve heard that’s *the* most painful place, aside from like your nips or your pussy.”

I make a face. “*Why* would anyone in their right mind get tattoos there??”

She snorts. “You tell me, Queen of Pain.” She grins salaciously me as she gulps her vodka soda. “Is ‘property of the Marquis’ in curly script right above your vag next on the list?”

I roll my eyes as she cracks up.

“So.” I look at her sharply as the party throbs around us. “We going to talk about your Adept now?”

Her cheeks turn pink. “Nope.”

I snort. “Any particular reason?”

“Several,” she says primly.

“You two seem…” I glance at the ceiling. “Close?”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she says, shrugging. “Carson is a psychopath and a fucking sadist. Yes, he was my Adept. But now that part's done, and I don’t ever need to cross paths with his crazy ass again.”

My gaze slides past her shoulder to where Carson is sitting by the bar, a dark, slightly malicious look etched on his face as he *stares* at the back of her head.

“You, uh, sure about that?” I murmur, pulling my gaze back to hers.

“*Yep*,” she mutters.

A shadow falls over us. I glance up and my heart skips when I see Vaughn standing there, his ice-blue eyes almost glowing in the dark club light.

“Ms. De Luca,” he growls, inclining his head toward Gabby.

“*Mr. Marquis*,” she grins back.

He turns to me. “I need you. *Now*.”

Heat sparks within me. Gabby snickers, mouthing “have fun” at me before Vaughn takes my hand, helps me up, and then escorts me across the room.

“What’s up?” I ask as he sits in a chair up on a small stage, like a king or Roman emperor watching a debauched bacchanalian feast.

I gasp as he tugs me into his lap, my ass hitting his thighs as he wraps a large arm possessively around my waist.

“Nothing,” he murmurs. “I just wanted you right here. How’s the tattoo?”

“It hurts,” I admit. “But not too badly.”

“Maybe you just have a high pain tolerance.”

I smirk at him. “Gee, I wonder who I can blame for that?”

He grins. “*Blame?* I think you mean thank.” He leans closer, his lips brushing my earlobe. “On your knees, ideally.”

I flush, my core liquefying when I feel his hot, hard erection against my ass.

“You're happy with the placement?” he murmurs, tracing a finger up my arm.

I nod. “I mean, I *was* thinking about getting it on my throat, like someone else I know, but alas,” I sigh, “it would ruin my whole princess in a tower aesthetic.”

He cups my face and forces my gaze to meet his.

“You were never a princess in a tower,” he growls. “You were a Queen waiting for her throne.”

Then he kisses me, and I’m pretty sure my feet leave the ground.

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, the party is still going strong, but Vaughn pulls me into his arms, whispering that he has to go take care of something. After he promises to “fill my slutty cunt with his cum later and then fuck my ass until it leaks down my thighs”—that's a direct quote—and kisses me, he leaves to deal with his whatever, and I go back to dancing with Gabby.

…Who is one hundred percent either getting eye-fucked or eye-*murdered* by Carson from across the room.

Eventually, my energy is depleted.

“I have to go,” I groan as I hug her.

“Same,” she sighs. “Shall we bounce?”

I nod.

We collect our things and leave the club, waiting at the curb for our Ubers. Gabby’s comes first.

“Love ya,” she blurts, clearly feeling her drinks as she hugs me tightly and then kisses my cheek. “Get home safe!”

I scrutinize her Uber driver. The woman assures me she’ll make sure Gabby gets inside her place safely before taking off.

My phone dings, letting me know my own car is waiting around the corner.

I exhale, taking off at a brisk pace. All I want is to get into bed. I mean, at least until Vaughn comes home and makes me scream.

I spot my Uber and wave at the elderly driver. He waves back as I start to jog over to the waiting SUV.

I don’t make it.

Something heavy slams into my head. I scream a shocked, choked cry as lights cascade through my vision and pain explodes in my skull. Another wave of agony slashes through my knees as they hit the pavement before another blow to the head sends me sprawling face-first across the sidewalk.

Cold, sharp metal presses to my neck and cuts into my skin..

"*You're ruining everything*."

Pure fear ripples over my skin as the rasping male voice snarls into my ear, pressing the knife to my throat.

"*Stay the fuck away from Vaughn and stay the fuck away from the Syndicate.*"

Another blow to my head sends fireworks through my senses before I hear footsteps rushing off. My vision swims as I see my Uber driver running over.

Then I black out.

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VAUGHN

Where am I.

Consciousness fades and returns, my senses muddied as if underwater.

My vision cuts in and out.

Where am I?

Where are WE, you ungrateful fuck.

Shut up.

This time, I force my eyes to open and stay that way.

What the actual fuck.

I'm in the driver's seat of my car, with blood on my hands.

My vision swims again, but I stab my gaze past the mostly dry blood on my skin to my watch, and I stiffen.

It's been three hours since I left the party to go meet Sebastian, who'd found another of Beaumont's cockroaches.

I met Seb, and he and I dealt with the scumbag. That resulted in blood on my hands, sure, but I cleaned up. I was going to surprise Evelina back at the party.

Besides, that was almost two hours ago. What the fuck happened?

A cold laugh echoes inside me.

We happened, motherfucker.

I shove the voice aside, then glance around for my phone. I find it in my jacket pocket.

Fuck me, I have *fifty-three* missed calls and a gazillion texts. I start to page through them, then suddenly go deathly still.

Holy fuck.

* * *

"SIR! *SIR*!!" I ignore the nurses and the hospital security guard that try to stop me as I barge past the information desk.

Someone hurt her.

Someone hurt what's *mine* and put her in the goddamn hospital. So, no, I don't need to do literally anything but make sure she's okay and then go burn down the fucking world until I find out who did this to her.

I storm through the hallways like a wraith, my hands still bloodied and my eyes stabbing straight ahead. Then I see room 206 and almost take the door off its hinges as I crash inside.

"*Eveli—*"

A truck or possibly a fucking grizzly bear barrels into me from the side. It hits so hard that I grunt as I'm lifted off my feet and slammed into the wall, hard.

Black spots flicker in my eyes as I blink back stars. I'm vaguely aware of screaming as I fling my hands out and try to steady myself against the wall.

What the *fuck* was—

"*I'm going to fucking rip you in half, motherfucker!"*

Oh.

That's what.

I frown as I look up into Roman Nikitin's murderous face, his hands gripping my shirt collar as he pins me to the wall.

"ROMAN!" Evelina screams. "Roman, *STOP IT*!"

I look past his shoulder to where she's sitting in the hospital bed. Before I can even focus on her, her goddamn brother slams the back of my skull against the wall again, making more stars explode through my vision.

"Why the *fuck* was my sister calling for you while she was half unconscious, motherfucker!" he roars. "What the *fuck* did you—?!"

"Whoa! ROMAN!!"

Val runs into the room, spots us, and then rushes over. He throws his arms around Roman's neck and torso and then bodily yanks him away from me, shoving him back and then stepping between us. "Stop it!! *Fuck*!" he barks, whirling toward Roman. "The *fuck* is going on?!"

"I'm going to fucking murder your brother!" Roman snarls, trying to shove past Val. "*That's* what!"

"ROME! STOP!"

Evelina's scream pierces through the room, startling all of us.

My heart drops when I see the flecks of dried blood on her cheek and the bandage around her head.

"Roman, dude, *chill*," my brother hisses, planting his hands on his boyfriend's heaving chest. "They're both adults, and they're capable of making their own—"

"You *knew*?"

Shit.

Val swallows, locking his eyes with Roman's. "Easy, Wreckage."

"Roman, *listen*," Evelina says, gingerly starting to get out of her hospital bed.

She jolts as all three of us yell at her to stay the fuck put.

Roman's eyes lance into her as he stabs his finger wildly in my direction. "Evie, you're *with* this motherfucker?! This goddamn *psychopath*?!"

"*Hey*," Val snarls, poking Roman's chest. "That's my brother. Dial it back, man."

"He's been fucking around with *my* little sister!" Roman roars back.

"Who is a grown-ass woman!!" Evelina yells from behind him. Her eyes burn into her brother's. "And capable of making her own decisions!"

Roman is still shaking with fury. "They're going to discharge you soon, Eves. I'll take you home, and we'll talk there—"

"No need," I growl.

Roman whirls on me. "*Excuse me*?!"

"Rome?"

He turns to her when Evelina gives him a crooked, wry smile. "He's who I've been staying with," she says quietly. "And when they discharge me, I'd like to go back to his place with him." Her eyes slide past him to me, and a small smile creeps over her face.

I can't help but grin back.

This girl…

"*What*?" Roman seethes. "No, Evie. We're going *home*, and that's final."

Her mouth purses and she slowly shakes her head. "No, Rome, we're not," she says. "I love you, and I always will. But I'm going to his place tonight."

Roman's face is pure fury as he turns to glare malevolently at me.

I have all sorts of thoughts about taunting him. But I keep quiet, for her sake.

"You gotta let it go, Wreckage," Val says gently, putting a tattooed hand on Roman's chest. "She's made her choice."

Roman glares at him. “Whose fucking side are you on, anyway?” he snaps.

Val jabs a finger at him. “There are no *sides* here, motherfucker,” he growls. “Just a bunch of humans with complex emotions.” He jabs Roman in the chest again. “And if you keep going like this,” he says quietly, “you’ll lose her.”

Roman’s jaw clenches.

“*Fine*,” he chokes, walking over to his sister. “The detective said he’s going to check back with you in the morning, after you’ve recovered a little more. So keep your phone *on*, please.”

She nods. “Will do.”

Roman takes her hand, his brow furrowing. “You’re *sure* you don’t remember anything about the motherfucker who hit you?”

She shakes her head. “I never even saw him.”

I know from Val’s flood of texts that came in while I was apparently blacked out in my car that Evelina was walking out of the club and to her Uber when some fucking dead man…or he *will be*, when I find him…hit her in the head from behind, knocking her down. Her Uber driver, an older Indian gentleman named Kabir—I had Gideon check him out on my way to the hospital, he’s clean—saw the whole thing from his car. Future Dead Man was wearing a black ski mask, and ran off when Kabir rushed over after seeing the attacker press a knife to Evelina’s throat.

Roman sighs, taking her hands in his and squeezing. “Evie, just come home—”

“*Roman*.”

His eyes fall shut, and he takes a slow breath as he nods. “Okay, fine. But please, call me in the morning. Call me any time. Literally.”

I can’t fault the guy for slamming me into a wall. Roman’s a lot like me in that he’ll go fucking apeshit when anyone he loves is hurt.

He leans down and kisses his sister's forehead. They talk for a second, and Val moves closer to me.

“He’ll cool down,” he says quietly. Then he gives me a sharp look. “But if you fucking hurt her…” his eyes glint. “It won’t just be Rome that you have to worry about. Understand?”

I nod. “With full clarity, brother.”

Roman shoots me a dark look as Val goes over to hug Evelina gently. When they’re both gone, I walk over to sit on her bed, taking her hands in mine. Her face crumples, like she’s been holding it together for her brother’s sake, and when I lean down to kiss her, she sobs a little as she kisses me back.

“I’m going to find who did this to you,” I mutter. “I’m going to drag them to *hell* for this.”

“Thank you,” she smiles. “But first… Can you take me home?”

“Gladly.”

“Vaughn?”

Evelina’s brow furrows. “There’s… What happened to your hands?”

* * *

It’s two in the morning by the time I’ve gotten her home, bathed her, gently washed her hair around the lump on the back of her skull, and gotten her into bed. She falls asleep in my arms instantly, her cheek against my chest and her hand on my abs.

But sleep doesn’t come as easily for me.

First, I make sure every available asset I have at my disposal is combing the city and tearing it apart to find the man who dared hurt her.

But there's another, far darker thought that keeps me up until dawn is starting to break over the horizon.

The blank space of time I don’t remember.

The blood on my hands, like the blood when Quentin lashes me.

But *I'm* Quentin.

And Demon.

And a dozen others, all parts of my psyche that I can't always control.

Quentin wants Evelina gone.

And Quentin is part of me.

Icy coldness slices into my chest as I look down at my hands, still seeing the blood on them even though they're spotlessly clean now.

What if it was me.

What if I did this.

What if I'm lost further in the darkness inside me than I realize?

What if I do it again?

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EVELINA

MILENA

Are you ok?

No, I'm not.

It’s been two weeks since I was attacked outside the Syndicate party. But that’s not why Milena’s texting me. She and the rest of our friends don’t even *know* about that, because I begged Val not to tell anyone.

No, she’s 100% texting me because she just got the same news alert that I did.

> ***Moscow: Former NYC Crime Boss Pavel Nikitin Arrested in FSB Raid of Minsky Bratva.***

Physically, I’m fine. The two big lumps on the back of my head have disappeared, and the cut on the side of my neck from the knife is just a fading pink line. For the first few days after it happened, I was jumping at my own shadow or the slightest sudden sound. But that has abated for the most part.

But again, the attack isn’t why I’m not okay.

The headline involving my dad being arrested by Russia’s version of the FBI does have a lot to do with it, but it's only part of the reason.

It’s Vaughn.

For the first couple of days after I came home from the hospital, he was right there, permanently at my side. I mean the man literally made me *pee* with the door cracked open, as if I was going to get jumped in his own bathroom.

But since then, he feels a little more distant. It's like the walls between us that I thought were coming down are slowly being put up again.

He won’t sleep with me, either—in either sense of the word.

He literally won’t sleep in the same bed with me. He brings me to his bedroom every night, and tucks me in. He’ll even crawl into bed *with* me and let me fall asleep against his chest. But if I wake later, he’s gone, sleeping alone in one of the guest rooms.

It's confusing, and it stings. Especially because when I ask, he tells me it’s because he’s been having nightmares and doesn’t want to wake me. Which I'd almost believe except he won’t look me in the eye when he says it.

He also won’t *fuck me*. I’ve asked, but he keeps saying I need to rest, because I’m still recovering. Like suddenly, the man who gets off on fucking me like he’s trying to murder me with his cock is afraid he'll hurt me.

That *also* stings, because I really want him to.

I *need* him to.

He's like a drug. Or therapy. When we slip into that headspace together, where he’s my monster and I’m his prey, and he owns and controls me in every possible way, it’s like I can breathe easier.

See with more clarity. *Be* with more honesty.

The brutal violence that we create in bed is my catharsis, and without it, I feel like I’m backsliding into a nervous version of me I don’t recognize anymore.

ME

You saw, huh?

MILENA

U want to talk? I know it’s complicated with ur dad.

ME

Thanks, but I think I need to talk to Rome first.

MILENA

OK. I’m here if u need anything, girl. You know that. Luv u.

ME

Love u too <3<3<3

I’ve barely hit the send button when my phone lights up.

Roman.

“Hi,” I say quietly.

He exhales. “You read the news?”

“I did.”

There’s a moment or two of silence.

“I guess you’re at *his* fucking place?”

“His name is Vaughn,” I say quietly.

“*Yeah*,” he grunts sourly.

“Roman, is it really so awful that I grew up? That I found someone who—”

“Who *what*, Eves?” he snaps.

“Oh, come on!” I hurl back. “I don’t remember giving you anything but love and support when you were coming to terms with who you were and trying to find the courage to tell me you were in love with a man!”

My brother barks out a cold laugh. “You are *not* seriously equating me coming out with you deciding to jump into your villain era by shacking up with a fucking lunatic.”

My jaw tightens. “That’s *not* what I’m talking about. I’m talking about siblings having each other’s back. Also, that is really fucking unfair.”

He snorts. “For fuck’s sake, even *Val* thinks his brother is a sociopath.”

“Do you know why I started talking to Vaughn in the first place?“ I snap. “Because I knew you didn’t want to have anything to do with helping Dad. So I went to him instead.”

He exhales in a slow stream “Jesus, Evie. I don’t know what it’s going to take for me to impress upon you how much—”

“You hate him?” I snap. “No, Rome, I think you’ve made that abundantly clear.”

My brother exhales.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. I don’t hate him,” he says flatly. “I don’t care enough to bring hate into the conversation where Dad is concerned. I wish you could appreciate that.”

I shake my head. “I just…I wanted to believe there was good in him, you know? I mean he’s *us*. If he’s rotten to the core, what does that say about you and me?”

Roman nods, exhaling. “And that’s why you went to Vaughn and the Syndicate.”

“Sort of,” I mumble. “I tried a bunch of other places first, but no one wanted to touch helping him with a ten-foot pole.”

“And that still didn’t drop any clues for you…?” he sighs. “Sorry, go on.”

“I…actually talked to Andrés Torvallés first.”

Roman groans. “*For fuck's sake*, Evie. If I’d known you were going to people like the *Torvallés* family, or the fucking Syndicate—”

“You’d have what,” I say tightly. “Done something about Dad?”

At first, a long exhale is his only answer. Then he clears his throat.

“Wait, when did you go to Andrés? He’s been missing and presumed dead for like three four months.”

I nod. “I know,” I say quietly, thinking of the night when Vaughn yanked Andrés out of that car and just…killed him.

For touching me.

For trying to hurt me.

Something sparks inside of me.

“Can I say something?” Roman says quietly.

“Sure?”

He exhales. “Look, I know you always had it easier with Dad. And that’s nothing on you, he’s just old school like that, and you were the princess,” he says gently. “But I’ve spent my life being able to see him pretty clearly. And the thing is, his priority is, always has been, and always *will be*, himself. Full stop.”

I frown, looking down at my hands.

“I don’t even necessarily think he’s an evil guy, Evie,” he continues. “He’s just…a shitty, defective human being who thinks only about himself, and that makes him do shitty stuff.”

He sighs heavily.

“There’s no helping someone like that. Because at the end of the day, he’s his own worst enemy. You could have done everything in the world to help him when he was whining about being abandoned in Russia. You could have given him every cent you have and a fucking organ, and that prick would *still* find a way to let you down and take it all for himself. I guarantee that, and if you still don’t believe me, look at today’s headline again.”

Roman snorts.

“The Minsky Bratva has spent *decades* paying off the right people in the Russian Government to basically be untouchable. It worked for them for *years*.” He chokes out a bitter laugh. “Then they got in bed with our dad,

who *immediately* did something incredibly stupid and utterly self-serving and fucked up the whole thing." Roman sighs. "The Minsky family was untouchable for *thirty fucking years*, and all it took was four fucking weeks allying themselves to that fucking prick to get their shit kicked in."

He sighs, and we both go quiet for a moment.

"And then there's you," he finally says tiredly. "I might not like Vaughn that much, and I sure as fuck don't like *you* and Vaughn together. But what pisses me off the most is that you getting together is just one more piece of collateral damage from fucking *Pavel*."

My heart twists.

"*That's* what you think of me finding happiness with Vaughn?" I mutter. "That it's *collateral damage*?"

"Isn't it?" he grunts. "Dad whined to you, knowing you'd do anything to help him. And you did, by quite literally getting in bed with a psycho like Vaughn—"

"Half your friends are fucking psychos!" I yell. "Nero?! Carmen?! *Nico*?! I mean are you even serious right now?!"

"Well I'd never in a million years let you *date them*!" he snaps.

I bark a thin, brittle laugh. "*Let me*? Roman, I'm twenty-three years old! I'm not a kid anymore! Why the fuck are you acting like it's the end of the world that I grew up and found someone?!"

"Because of who that someone *is!*" he roars. "I've done everything I can to shield you from the worst parts of the world you and I grew up in, and now here you are with the *actual worst* of that world—"

"Look at our last name!" I yell, choking out a bitter laugh. "Rome, that world *is* my world! Why are you so worried that I might be in love with someone from—"

"*Please*," he snarls. "We both know whatever this shit is with Vaughn, it's a rebellious phase *at best*. I just don't understand why you couldn't just go out and get a tattoo like a normal person!"

“*Roman*,” I seethe, my eyes squeezing shut. “I love you. But fuck off.”

I hang up abruptly and then drop the phone onto the bed next to me before shoving my fingers through my hair.

Dammit.

* * *

I END up having a four-day weekend off from the Zakharova—which Vaughn seems to know before I even tell him—so we decide to get out of the city and head up to Blackbriar Hall.

It ends up being *exactly* what I need, because our first night there, Vaughn’s self-imposed celibacy comes to a crashing end.

With the whole place to ourselves, the first night is pure *madness*. The huge old house already feels haunted, but with Vaughn chasing me through the dark hallways, it’s *exactly* the escapism I need.

Every pound of my pulse feels like fresh new blood is filling my veins. Every gasp wakes me up a little more. Every rough, claiming, stretching, filling stroke of his thick cock as he takes every single part of me is like a rush of life.

And when he’s finally done with me, and I crawl broken, bloodied, and shaking up between his legs to take his still hard, slick cock into my mouth, he groans deeply and tangles his fist in my hair, knowing I still need more.

I’ll always need more.

But the second night, our games get put on hold.

Sabine comes to visit.

Freaking cock block.

Just the same, it’s great to see her. She’s got this biting, brutal sense of humor which I really enjoy. Before, it felt like she was weaponizing it on

me—because she *was*. But now, after our talk, it feels less personal and more just who she is.

And I really like that fire in her.

Vaughn must guess that I'm a little annoyed at her being here—or at least, my libido is. Because after dinner, he leads me outside, half-rips my dress off, and then chases me through the graveyard before bending me over the front steps of a faded, crumbling mausoleum and fucking the *hell* out of me from behind with both of his hands around my throat until I come, choking his name.

It's dark when I wake up later, alone in his bed. My brow furrows as sleep fades and I try to figure out why I'm awake.

I glance at the bed next to me, reaching over to feel the sheets are cold. I fell asleep snuggled up to him earlier. But even as I was fading out, I had a feeling he'd keep his streak going by finding another bed somewhere. That seems to be exactly what happened.

I sigh heavily as I drop my head back to the pillow. Maybe I'm awake because I miss him.

I miss the man I've became so wrapped up with that I'm not sure anymore where I stop and he starts.

I close my eyes and try to regulate my breathing to fade back to sleep. But then I hear it.

Was that…*yelling*?

I sit upright in bed, my brows knitting. My heart jumps when I hear it again—faint, distant, muffled. Definitely yelling, or an argument.

I slip from the bed and then pull on some shorts and a hoodie. At the door to the bedroom I pause, trembling when I hear the faraway voice again. A chill skitters up my spine as I remember walking out onto the landing in Vaughn's penthouse and seeing him arguing with himself.

…holding a knife to his own throat.

Fear ignites in my chest as I walk down the hallway and then up the stairs to the observatory. I think that's where the sound is coming from.

“Vaughn?” I say quietly as I step inside. I frown when I realize there’s no one in there. I *know* I just heard yelling—

“*—what you have to do!*”

I gasp, whirling at the muffled sound of a barked voice. Nobody there, just the bookshelves lining the wall next to the door, opposite the windows that look out over the mountains and forest.

What the *hell*?

I step closer, running my hands over the dusty books in the ancient wooden cases. Suddenly, my fingers catch an edge.

I stiffen, peering at the raised lip of wood where there shouldn’t be a seam. Then muffled yelling comes again.

Holy shit.

It’s coming from *behind* the shelves.

My pulse quickens as I slide my fingers over the edge of the bookcase, and my muscles tense as I pull back.

The bookcase swings open on hidden hinges, gliding easily across the floor. Behind it, a low, dark, brick hallway stretches out before making a sharp turn and descending into the shadows.

“*Don’t you fucking dare!*”

That was unmistakably Vaughn.

Then another voice rasps up from the darkness, crawling over my skin like spiders.

“*Or whaaaaat…*”

That was *not* Vaughn.

And yet, there's a familiarity to it that sends an icy ripple snaking through me.

I should just leave it, whatever it is. It could be a work thing for all I know. Maybe he’s just having a business argument with one of his people?

In the middle of the night? Down a secret passage?.

My mind starts replaying the visual of his freaked-out, faraway look, like he was a passenger in his own body as he held a knife to his jugular.

No. I’m not “just leaving” this at all.

I step through the doorway and then walk down the brick hallway, sliding my hand over the rough, warm stones next to me. When I get to a corner that starts to disappear into the shadows, I realize it’s actually a circular brick staircase, descending into the gloom.

The yells become muffled.

Keep going.

My hand stays firmly on the wall in the almost pitch darkness as I slowly descend the stairs. Terror lurks in every scuff of my feet and lingers in every shadow that plays tricks with my mind. The staircase winds down and down, until I’m sure I’ve gone past the second and first floors of the huge house and am going even deeper, into Hell itself.

“*You’re weak! Pathetic! Can’t even distance yourself from one little distraction!”*

A chill crawls down my spine.

It doesn’t sound like Vaughn. But I *know* I’ve heard that deep, rasping voice before.

But *what the hell* is that voice doing yelling at Vaughn at the bottom of some creepy-ass secret staircase behind a hidden bookcase door?

“*You go near her again, and I will rip your fucking head off!”*

That's Vaughn again. But the sheer violence in his tone does nothing to calm the racing of my heart.

The stairs even out to a brick hallway. The air feels heavier down here, and it's strangely warm. Up ahead, faint flickering light outlines the edges of a closed door.

"You won't," the familiar-yet-not voice sneers with cold amusement from just beyond the closed door ahead. "Because we both know it's POWER you value above all else. More than your brother, more than companionship. Certainly more than a little piece of tail!"

I flinch but keep moving toward the door, my pulse thudding in my veins and a dark, twisting sensation slithering through my center.

My hand wraps around the knob, my heartbeat screaming in my ears as I slowly push the door open, readying myself for whatever might greet me.

But nothing could possibly prepare me for this.

The room is all brick, with high, vaulted ceilings and a fire crackling in a fireplace on one side. There's a sitting area with two couches, a makeshift kitchen with piping for a sink coming out of the wall plus a fridge, and a bed.

But none of that is what has my jaw hitting the floor.

Vaughn is shirtless, his chest heaving and his broad shoulders trembling. Blood trickles down his body from a myriad of horrible whip marks crisscrossing his muscled back.

The instrument of those marks—a leather riding crop glistening with blood—is in *his own hand*. His face is twisted demonically with rage, his eyes bulging and his jaw clenched as he brandishes the riding crop almost like it's a gun.

But it's *the other person* in the room—a much older, gray-haired man standing facing him—who actually has a gun wrapped in his fingers, his cold gaze and the barrel both trained lethally on Vaughn.

Everything freezes. Slowly, the older man turns, and when he sees me standing in the doorway, his lips curl wickedly.

"Ahh, so she arrives," he murmurs.

The gun is suddenly pointing at *me*.

I gasp, going stock-still as the man with the dark look in his eyes and the gun in his hand smiles venomously at me.

“Won’t you come in, my dear.”

“*No!*” Vaughn roars when he sees me, his whole face going white. “No, Evelina! RUN!!”

The older man shakes his head. “I wouldn’t advise that,” he growls as he glances significantly at the gun in his hand.

My pulse skips as I turn to look at Vaughn. There's a visceral fear in his eyes I’ve never seen before.

“*Get out*, Evelina,” he chokes. “Please. Just go.”

“Oh, she’s not stupid enough to do that,” the older man smiles, chuckling.

“He won’t hurt you!” Vaughn roars. “*I WON’T HURT YOU!*”

“Vaughn—!” I scream. “Vaughn, who—”

“No one!” he blurts, his face haggard and lined as he turns to me. “Just *go*, princess. Please, before I do something terrible!!”

What?

“Vaughn, I—who—”

“*Get OUT*!” he roars.

Suddenly, he’s raising the riding crop and whirling to point it at the other man.

“*Stop it!*” he bellows. “Put the fucking gun down, Quentin!!” His lips curl as blood drips down his body. “Quentin, *quit pointing that fucking gun at her*!!”

A shudder wrenches through me as my eyes dart between them.

“Vaughn—” I choke. “Vaughn, who—”

“He’s not real, Evelina!” Vaughn’s face crumples. “He’s just in my head! He’s *me*, and if you get the fuck out now, I can stop him from hurting you!”

Horror washes over me.

“Vaughn,” I murmur, staring at him and then at the man holding a gun. “Vaughn, he’s—”

“He’s *me*, baby,” he chokes, dropping to his knees and shaking his head.

“Vaughn—”

“He’s not real! He just—”

“*Yes he is*,” I choke, paling as the man grins widely and levels the gun right at me. “Vaughn… I’m staring right at him.”

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VAUGHN

THERE COMES a point when the madness becomes too much.

When the thing you call sanity comes crashing to the ground.

When who you think you are, and what you think you know, splits in two before your very eyes.

After that, it's nothing but a black downward spiral.

I stare in horror as Evelina *looks right at* that part of my mind that I try to keep locked away.

Acknowledging him.

Seeing him as a physical presence.

That's what breaks me.

I drop to my knees, shaking, my vision blurring in and out. Little lightning storms flash and thunder behind my eyes, making me glitch and twitch, my eyes just *staring* at Evelina as she stares in horror at the man pointing a gun at her.

Not me.

Not my hand.

Not my gun.

His gun, in *his* hand.

How is this real.

How is she seeing him.

Maybe she's a fucking crazy as we are, motherfucker, Demon snarls inside of me. *Maybe that's why your dick gets so fucking hard for her, and why you follow her around like a beaten dog. Crazy recognized craaaaaaazy, you stupid fuck.*

I don't know how to respond to that. All I can do is stare as Evelina walks into the room when Quentin tells her to and sits in the chair he indicates. She's shaking, her eyes wide with terror. They dart to me, and I see the plea in them.

Help me.

Do something.

Save me.

But how do I save her from a part of me that I don't have any control over?

I can't compartmentalize this anymore, not when it's leering in my face. Now when it's pointing a gun at the woman I love with more of me than I've even ever loved myself with.

Why am I doing this.

Why can't I stop.

I see Quentin holding a gun in her face, yet I know *he* is *me*. I know that it's *me* shoving her into that chair, pointing death at her face, threatening her, making her quail with fear, breaking her heart.

And I can't fucking stop it.

Reality blurs.

Cracks.

And shatters.

Quentin walks over to me, and I'm numb as he pulls the crop from my shaking hand and replaces it with the grip of the gun. Icy cold cuts into me as he lifts me to my feet, wraps my fingers around the gun, and then raises my hand, until the gun is pointed right at Evelina's horrified, tear-streaked face.

She's sobbing. She's telling me he's real, she can see him, I can stop this.

She's wrong.

I don't think I can.

"*Do it,*" Quentin snarls. "You've spent your life building up to this! *Seize* the throne that you were born to, Grandson! There's only *you* and the Syndicate! There is *no room* for distractions like her."

My hand holding the gun trembles and then drops to my side as my head slowly shakes.

"*No,*" I hear myself choke. "No, I won't—"

Fire erupts over my face as the crop lashes across my cheek, splitting it open. I go stumbling back and fall to the ground, the gun clattering across the floor.

Evelina screams and lurches from the chair. Then she cries out, her head snapping to the side as the back of Quentin's hand cracks across her mouth.

The back of *my* hand…

I see Quentin calmly pick up the gun.

The barrel presses to my forehead, and I gently close my eyes.

Maybe this is the only way to save her.

From me.

"You told me once you were willing to do whatever it took to lead the Syndicate," Quentin murmurs quietly. "That you would do *anything*."

"I was wrong," I hear myself say.

He exhales. “Then I fear you are not fit to lead this organization.”

Blinding pain and light explode behind my eyes as the barrel of the gun slams to the side of my head. It hits me again and again, wet, sticky blood splattering my face and dripping into my eyes as I drop a hand to the floor to steady myself.

Evelina is screaming my name and sobbing. I look up just as she lurches from the chair again. I watch in stunned, slow-motion horror as Quentin brings his hand back and cracks the gun across her face, sending her back into the chair.

I watch him bring the barrel back up and point it between her tearful eyes.

That's the moment when it clicks into place.

When the shattered parts of me strewn like broken glass across the floor fling back together, like a tape being playing in reverse.

Puzzle pieces find their places.

Fractures meld together.

The roaring in my head dulls, and suddenly, I have utter clarity.

He is not we, is he?

You finally see the truth. No, motherfucker, he’s not.

Because *I* would never hurt her like that. I *couldn’t*. I know that with visceral, grounding certainty.

I feel it in my veins, down to the core of my being.

I would never put a gun to her face.

And that’s what shatters the illusion. That’s what rips down the gauzy veil and lets reality come glaring in on me.

The man with a gun to her head isn’t me. He can't be.

He’s not a manifestation of my broken, fractured mind.

He’s fucking *real*.

He’s alive.

And if he's alive, he can fucking *die*.

Quentin grunts when I crash into him, sending him clean off his feet and slamming him into the wall.

I roar, scrambling to bring the gun up. Just as I do, pain bites into me, taking my breath away.

Wetness floods my skin. Evelina screams, and I look down in confusion at the blood pouring from my side.

Fire erupts through me when Quentin slashes the blade across my ribs again. My vision kaleidoscopes as I stumble to the side.

“That was foolish, Grandson,” he exhales quietly. “Very, very foolish.”

I groan and drop to my knees as he turns to Evelina. He slips the knife into the back of his belt and then stoops slightly to pick up the riding crop.

“I wonder what would break you first, Grandson,” he muses. “Watching me whip her pretty face to ribbons? Or maybe going after her legs and feet, and clipping the dancer’s wings right in front of you.” He turns to level a cold look at me. “I wonder if that would make you see what is necessary in order to *lead*.”

“*I…*”

I choke on the words as blood trickles down the back of my throat. My head swims, and I’m barely clinging to consciousness as my eyes slide from Quentin to the only person ever to have pulled me from my own madness.

The only person who’s ever seen the real me.

The only woman I’ve ever loved.

My gaze slides lethally back to Quentin.

“In the next sixrty seconds,” I mumble, blood trickling from my split lip and pouring from the stab wounds in my side, “I’m going to kill you.”

Quentin almost smiles with sick pride, shaking his head. “Yes! *There's* the monster I need, Grandson. There’s the savagery required to lead the Syndicate. Together, we will—”

“*No*,” I burble, my vision blurring. “No we. Because I’m going to kill you.”

His stares coldly at me, and his lips curl dangerously. “The face it is, then.”

He turns to Evelina as adrenaline explodes through my system.

But suddenly, Quentin cries out and twists violently. Blood splatters from the back of his head as it snaps to the side.

I don’t have time to dwell on the how or the what.

With my last surge of energy, I lurch from the ground, grab the knife from the back of Quentin’s belt, and ram it as hard as I can between his shoulder blades.

Quentin screams in agony, his back contorting as I yank the blade out and then jam it in again.

And again.

And fucking *again*, until finally it hits home in the side of his neck.

Blood erupts from the wound as he claws at the hilt of the knife, stumbling, tripping, falling to the ground.

Then he goes still.

Evelina cries out as I rush to her and wrap her trembling body in my arms.

“*I’m right here*,” I murmur against her neck. “I’m here, princess,” I choke. “Just me. Just me. *Just*—”

“*Vaughn*—”

Her grip on me tightens, then releases, and she taps on my back frantically.

“*Vaughn*,” she chokes as she pulls away, staring past me in utter disbelief.

I wince as I turn…

What the fuck.

Because I suddenly see that it was a fire poker that hit Quentin in the head. And I see that, because the person who hit him with it is standing right there shaking, eyeing both of us nervously as her chest rises and falls with heavy breath.

STANDING right there.

"So…" Sabine says quietly as she drops the fire poker with a heavy clang. "*Surprise.*"

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EVELINA

"My dad was an amazing guy."

Sabine is looking down at her hands as her fingers twist together.

"And a *great* dad." She smiles fondly as she looks up at me. "But he struggled raising a daughter by himself after Mom died. He tried his best, but there were things that fell through the cracks. Like…I ended up having to watch a YouTube video to learn how to put in a tampon after I got my first period."

Her lips twist wryly, and she exhales slowly as she looks over to Vaughn, fast asleep on the couch.

"I think understanding different kinds of love was something else that fell through the cracks."

The last hour has been exhausting. After everything that happened down in the hidden basement, my first thought wasn't "wow, Sabine can *walk*". It was "we need to get Vaughn upstairs and help him because I think he's bleeding out".

Thank God, he wasn't.

Quentin's knife did do some serious damage. But one of the things Sabine's father Stellan *did* teach her was how to field dress minor knife and gun wounds.

Sabine closes her eyes, taking a slow, deep breath. “I… I don’t even know how to start to apologize to everyone for the last two years,” she says quietly. She turns to look at Vaughn. “*Two fucking years* just…*lying*,” she chokes. “And about having a fucking disability!” There are tears in her eyes, her emotions twisting across her face. “Fuck, you must think I’m a monster.”

I slide my hand across the table and take hers in mine, stopping her from picking viciously at her own cuticles.

“No,” I say quietly. “I don’t. I think you lost your family, and you were desperate to be looked after, or *loved*, so you did whatever you could to hold on to that.”

I take a shaky breath as I squeeze her hand. “When my dad left for Moscow, and it was just Roman and me, it felt like my world was unraveling. And I was so desperate to hold it together in some semblance of normalcy, even if that normalcy was shitty, that I was willing to do anything to fix it.” I raise my brows. “Even pledge myself to a secret society and a man who terrified me. So, when I say *I get it*, I *really* do mean that I get it.” I smile quietly at her.

Tears flood Sabine’s face as she wipes her eyes against her shoulder.

“I don’t know if he’ll ever forgive me. I have no idea why *you* aren’t telling me to go fuck myself right now.”

I squeeze her hand again. “Because I really do understand it,” I say. “And so does he.”

Before he passed out on the couch, Vaughn hugged Sabine, held her close, and told her he loved her no matter what.

Now, the me of even a week ago would have been *livid* about that.

But I understand what they are, now. And I think Sabine does, too.

“He was just being nice,” she says quietly, looking over at Vaughn.

I snort. “Yes, because ‘just being nice’ is *so* on brand for him.”

She giggles, shaking her head and pulling her hands away from mine to wipe her eyes again. Then she takes a long, shaky breath in and out.

“After the bombing, I really *was* in a wheelchair for about a month. I had a spinal injury, and there was concern that it might not heal properly.” Her mouth twists as she looks up at me. “You’re right, you know. It’d been just Dad and me for so long, and then having him yanked away so suddenly…I think I was just desperate to be looked after. Vaughn and my dad had always been so close, and I’d always thought of him as this brother figure.”

She exhales and looks away. “When I was in that chair, he was so attentive, and always…*there*. I liked that,” she chokes. “I *really* liked that even though Dad was gone, I still had this…*thing.* This love. Except I never really learned what different kinds of love are, so for the longest time, I told myself that I was *in love* with Vaughn.”

She swallows heavily.

“I had this whole thing down to a science, even though *every fucking day*, I told myself it was insane. I mean, *Jesus*!” she chokes. “I’d go meet him and spend time with him in my fucking chair, and he’d look after me, and that made me feel good. Then I’d go home and *stand the fuck up*, and it was like I was taking off a work uniform and slipping into pajamas. I had two worlds: the one where Vaughn took care of me like family because he felt guilty about Syndicate business being the reason Stellan was dead and I was in that fucking chair. And then I would go home and walk around and use my normal kitchen, and waltz up a flight of stairs to go sleep in my loft.”

She shoots me an embarrassed look.

“Yeah, I…don’t have friends who stay over.”

I smile. “I *did* sort of wonder where *your* bed was.”

Sabine sniffs back tears as she smiles sadly at me.

“Evie, I was *such* a cunt to you, because I saw you as this threat. I guess part of it was telling myself that you were going to steal *my* Vaughn, which is so fucking cringe because I really *don’t* think of him like that. And then the rest was classic only child syndrome,” she sighs. “I was worried that I’d lose the last pseudo-family I’d managed to cling to.”

I blink back tears. “Sabine, I will *never* take him away from you. I promise.”

“The thing is,” she chokes, starting to cry, “I *get it* now. I get what romantic love is supposed to look like. And Vaughn and me?” She makes a face and shakes her head vigorously. “Jesus, he and I *do not* have that.” She smiles. “*You two do*.”

I start to cry, too, and we stand and come together in a tight, weepy hug.

“I’m really not crying because I’m sad a man I thought I was ‘in love with’ found someone else,” she murmurs. “I’m crying with happiness because the guy I love like the brother I never had has found someone as incredible as you.”

Well, shit.

If I thought I was crying before….

We end up opening a bottle of wine and staying up talking until the sun is rising. Sabine is still terrified that Vaughn is never going to forgive her for lying.

I promise her I’ll make damn sure he does.

But I know I won’t have to try that hard.

Eventually, Sabine falls asleep in one of the big leather chairs across from the couch Vaughn’s been sleeping on. I curl up next to him and close my eyes.

“I was wondering when you two would finally run out of steam.”

I slowly turn to face him. He shifts, wincing a little. But he manages to cup my face in his hands as his gorgeous blue eyes pierce into mine.

“I will never understand how you, with the father you have, turned out so *good*,” he murmurs. “But in case I don't say it enough…you, Evelina,” he growls, “are a *very* good person.”

I smile as I look into his eyes. “So is she,” I say. “Don’t forget that.”

He shakes his head. “I won’t.”

“Have you really been awake this whole time?”

His brow cocks. “Mm, more or less.” He grins. “I can't *wait* to find out how you plan on ‘making damn sure’ I do anything, princess.”

His eyes glint into mine. “There’s something else I need to tell you,” he growls. “Something I haven’t said enough. Or at all.”

I grin impishly. “What’s that?”

“I love you.”

My brain short-circuits. But that’s okay.

My lips still work just fine, and when he presses his to mine, that’s all I need.

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VAUGHN

"It's called Dissociative Identity Disorder."

It's dark, and I'm lying in bed with Evelina, where we've just woken up after sleeping all day. Sabine is still out cold in the guest room Evelina and I carried her to before we fell into our own bed.

I woke up briefly about two hours ago and saw on my group chat with the guys that my earlier request for help had been taken care of.

CARSON

Marcus, I regret to inform you that your dead grandfather has died. Again. My continued condolences.

SEBASTIAN

STFU weirdo

SEBASTIAN

V, we took care of the body. All good. Hope you're resting up.

CARSON

He's being coy. We know you're fine. Gideon snuck into your room and checked on you.

SEBASTIAN

Bro you are such a fucking narc it's insane.

GIDEON

Everyone chill. Just wanted to make sure you were ok, Vaughn. The bandages on your ribs look good, but you should get those bruises on the side of your face looked at. That might be an orbital fracture.

CARSON

Fun fact: before he fled the regime, Gideon was actually #1 surgeon in his homeland.

GIDEON

Dude, you are so fucking weird.

CARSON

I’m not the one trying to sneak peeks at Marcus and his lady friend.

GIDEON

It shouldn’t need saying, but I obviously did NOT peek at Evelina.

GIDEON

But she should have that shiner on her jaw looked at.

Evelina's gray eyes glint in the dark.

“They used to call it multiple personality disorder.”

Her brows knit. “How long have you…is *had it* the right expression?”

I nod. “Since I was a kid. It typically stems from severe childhood trauma.”

She shifts closer to me and kisses my chest. “*I’m so sorry*,” she says quietly, looking up at me. “That makes me so fucking angry at your dad. I mean, *Jesus*.”

She’s potentially going to be a *lot madder* at Morgan if some of the things I’ve been looking into over the last few weeks unfold the way I suspect they might.

But it’s that “I’m so sorry” that just…

Fuck.

I haven’t told many people about my disorder. Gideon knows. So does Sabine, as did Stellan. They share the same anger that I have at the childhood and the parents that led to the condition.

But Evelina is the first person who’s seen the flawed human I am and voiced *sorrow*, not anger, at the scars of my past.

“Do you…” Her brows furrow. “Never mind.”

“You can literally ask me anything, baby,” I murmur.

Her lips twist before her eyes drag back to mine. “I mean… In the movies, there are different *voices* and whole separate personalities…”

I smile. “It’s not quite that dramatic—well, not usually.”

She nods. “But you do have different…”she frowns. “*Would* you call them personalities?”

I nod. “Sort of. Some people call them ‘alters’. I’ve always referred to mine as ‘others’. For the most part, it’s like highly focused, compartmentalized emotive states that will occasionally be extra vocal in my head. Like I’ll get angry, but it's because the 'other' who controls anger is currently steering the ship. Or sadness. Or vengeance. Things like that.”

She smiles and leans down to kiss my chest again. “That’s actually fascinating.”

Where did you come from, Evelina Nikitin…

Even as I’m smiling at her, I see her expression falter.

“Last night,” she says quietly. “When I found you with…him…” Her eyes snap to mine. “We don’t have to talk about it if—”

“I’d actually like to talk about *all* of it with you,” I murmur.

She smiles.

“When I walked in, you were telling me that he wasn’t real. Like, *you* could see him, but you thought he was a manifestation or an *other* or an *alter* or whatever.”

Yeah.

I’ve been thinking about that pretty much nonstop since I realized down in that basement that *she* could see him, too.

That Quentin wasn’t an especially strong other inside me like Demon, but that he was alive.

And thus *killable*.

But that realization is a big one, and I'm fully aware that there's probably still a part of me that's in shock about it.

It's got to come out at some point, though. Because accepting that my "dead" grandfather was actually alive all these years doesn't just have ramifications for the recent past.

It goes *way* back.

I was five when I first started to have conversations with "the others".

No surprise, Demon with his intense anger was first. But then came profound sadness. Shame and anxiety were next, and so it went.

I was seven when Quentin showed up.

He was different than the others, who had mostly just talked to me in my head, or who I saw only vaguely in the mirror on occasion. The "manifestation" of a dead grandfather I'd barely ever heard of was so *real*. So tangible.

And since my DID has a way of blurring my perception of reality, I suppose I just accepted it. Especially since I was a kid in a broken home so desperate for a lifeline.

So when Quentin appeared and had answers and solutions, I listened. He told me about the Syndicate, and the safehouse, and how I could become part of a brotherhood that was bigger than me. He insisted that I'd been born to climb the ranks of this brotherhood, and one day lead it with him at my side.

Twenty-one years later, realizing that this "manifestation" was a *real man*, is…

Chilling.

Maybe a little embarrassing.

And a pretty fucking damning testament to exactly how fucking messed up my mind really is.

Evelina is crying by the time I finish telling her all this. She sobs against my chest, holding me tightly as she kisses my skin, telling me how sorry she is.

“That doesn’t say *shit* about you,” she hisses, looking up at me with tear-streaked, angry eyes. “It says your grandfather was a monster who manipulated a *child*, whom he knew had severe mental health issues, for his own purposes,” she chokes, angrily shaking her head. “You were a *kid*, Vaughn.”

My jaw grinds. “Well, but then I was a teenager, and then an adult, and I *still* perceived him as this part of my psyche,” I growl. “Because my head is so fucked up that I apparently can’t tell reality—”

“Vaughn.”

Her soft hand cups my face, pulling my eyes to hers.

“*Give yourself a little grace*,” she says quietly.

I wrap my arms around her and bury my face in her hair, kissing the top of her head as she burrows against me.

“It was him, by the way,” she says after a moment.

I frown. “What?”

“I recognized Quentin’s voice when I went down there. I couldn’t place it until later.” She bites her lip. “The man who attacked me the other day, outside the party. He told me ‘you’re ruining everything’ and ‘stay the fuck away from Vaughn’.” She nods. “That’s who it was.”

Jesus.

Thank fucking God.

It wasn’t me.

It wasn’t US.

I never truly thought I’d be capable of hurting her like that, even if I lost total control. But still. It’s a weight lifted from my chest to know for sure.

It still doesn’t explain the missing chunk of time that night, or the blood on my hands. That's…worrying.

“Are there any others?” she asks suddenly. “I mean if you could accept that Quentin was a figment of your mind…”

My jaw tightens. “You’re wondering if there are other ‘others’ inside of me who I see and interact with as viscerally as I did with him.”

She nods quietly.

Don’t you fucking dare spill our secret, motherfucker.

Historically, it's only rarely that I’ve been able to consciously shut Demon up.

But ever since I crossed paths with Evelina, that’s changed. Not completely. But I *do* have the ability to wrest control back, and to quiet him.

And that ability has only grown more powerful the longer I’ve been with her.

Don’t think for a fucking moment that we’ll allow ourselves to be shut—

This is a private conversation. Goodbye.

Silence fills my head.

“Yes,” I say quietly. “His name is Demon.”

I feel Evelina shiver against me.

I smile. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s just a name I gave him years and years ago.” My brow furrows. “The thing is, I *used* to fear him, because I thought he was fury or malice or something, and he was so much stronger than the rest. But I think I understand him more as I’ve gotten older.” I shake my head, smiling. “He’s *drive*. He’s what kept me alive all those years back in McKeesport, when I was coming apart at the seams. He helped me *survive*. He kept me going forward, always climbing, always reaching for the next rung.”

I cup her face and look deep into her eyes.

“He’s not evil, though he’s capable of terrible things. But I think he’s simply my ambition.” I smile wryly. “You’ve, uh…met him. Several times.”

She arches a curious brow. “I have?”

“You were asleep.”

She frowns. “I don’t—”

Her eyes widen as it hits her. Then her cheeks flush.

“*Oh*,” she says quietly.

“I’d say you rather like him,” I murmur.

I exhale slowly.

“So… There it is,” I growl. “Now you know all my dirty, fucked-up secrets.” My mouth twists as I look at her. “Now’s your chance to run,” I say quietly, only half kidding.

She starts to roll her eyes, but I shake my head.

“I’m serious, Evelina,” I murmur. “I’m not just a little tweaked in the head. I am *profoundly* fucked up.” I choke a cold laugh. “I mean for fuck’s sake, I’ve had sidebar convos with Demon even as we’ve been talking just now. I woke up in my car the night you were attacked with blood on my hands and I *didn’t know* if it’d been *me* who hurt you, because he was running the show.”

Her brows pinch. “*Do you* think you’d ever be capable of doing that?” she says quietly. “I mean of hurting me, and not in the way we both like—”

“*Never in a million fucking years*,” I growl immediately.

Right?

Fuck no. We enjoy her pussy far too much.

Be serious.

Consider the context of that request.

I am, and be fucking serious.

No. Obviously, we'd never harm her like that, and quite frankly, we're insulted you ever thought we would.

I clear my throat and let my eyes focus on hers again. "Never," I growl.

Evelina's lip catches in her teeth. "Where did you go just now? Your eyes sort of faded out and you…" she arches a brow. "Were you talking to him?" she says quietly. "To Demon?"

My jaw tightens.

"You can tell me," she says softly. "You don't have to hide it or feel embarrassed. It doesn't at all change what I feel for you."

I have no idea how a woman this incredible exists.

I exhale slowly. "Yeah," I murmur. "I was."

She smiles. "And?"

"He's, uh…" I clear my throat. "He's a big fan of yours."

She grins. "Well thank you, Demon. I'm a big fan of yours, too." She blushes and chews on her lip again as she looks up into my eyes. "Was he… *in charge*, when you came to my room at night and, you know…"

I nod. "Sometimes, yeah."

Her lips twist.

"Have you ever done that to any other girls?" she says quietly. "I mean has Demon ever *instructed* you, or driven you to—"

"No," I growl instantly. "Never."

"You're sure?"

I nod as I lower my mouth to hers and kiss her slowly. "Beyond a shadow of doubt," I murmur against her lips.

"*Good*," she says tightly, a little smirk teasing the corners of her lips. Her eyes drag back to mine. "Now, if I *did* still want to run away from you and all of this…"

My jaw tightens, and I grit my teeth at the stabbing sensation that cuts into me.

But this was always a possibility with sharing all of this with her. And after the shit I just told her, there's no way I could blame her for wanting to get the fuck away from—

"Would you chase me?"

My brow knits. "What?"

Evelina grins as she bites her lip. "If I ran," she says quietly, her eyes locked with mine. "Would I be chased?"

My mouth curls into a grin.

"Most certainly," I murmur.

"*You'd better*!" she giggles as I kiss her.

I lose myself in her kiss, tasing every moan and every swipe of her tongue as she melts against me. But when she pulls back, her brow is furrowed.

"If we're putting everything on the table" she shudders, "*I have to tell you something*."

I nod and hold her close, cupping her face and forcing her eyes to look into mine. "Whatever it is, princess" I growl, "you can tell me."

Her face twists. "I…before…" She takes a shaky breath. "When I first was trying to join the Syndicate, it wasn't *just* because I wanted you to help my father."

I smile quietly. "You were looking for Diego Torvallés' bastard heir."

Her jaw drops. "*You KNEW*!?"

My mouth curls as I chuckle. "Of course. But you don't have to worry about that anymore."

She frowns. "Vaughn, he threatened Val, and my brother—"

"I mean you don't have to worry about Diego ***at all*** anymore. He's dead."

Her eyes widen.

“I heard last night,” I say quietly. “Right before everything else happened. He was drunk on his yacht, fell off, and got hit by the propeller.”

Evelina blinks rapidly. “He...” Her eyes snap to mine. “You’re serious?!”

I nod. “It’s quite the uproar right now, with there being no obvious next in line for the throne aside from Andrés.”

She balks. “Holy *shit*.”

“I mean, there are two daughters. But Marcela quit the family over some drama a few years ago, and Claudia is twenty-one years old with nasal cavities permanently stuffed full of cocaine.” I smile wryly. “In any case, princess…” I lean down and kiss her softly. “Your problem with the Torvallés family is over.”

She melts against me as she touches my face and kisses me.

“Can I ask just *one* more thing?” she says with a small smile, pulling back.

“Of course.”

“Is there a cure? I mean, for the *others*?"

I shake my head. “No. But there’s treatments. Trauma-focused and cognitive behavioral therapy. Dialectic behavior therapy. Psychotherapy. EMDR therapy.”

“So the theme here is…” She frowns thoughtfully, tapping her chin. “*Therapy*?”

I grin. “Smartass.”

She grins back. “Have you ever tried any of them?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“Why not?”

“I just…haven’t,” I shrug. “Maybe I subconsciously knew that Demon was my driving force and what was keeping me moving forward. I think maybe

part of me worried that if therapy carved all of that fucked-up-ness out of me, it would take *him*, too, And he might be a fucking lunatic, but he's kept me alive more times than I can count." I snort and roll my eyes. "Or who the fuck knows."

Evelina slides her eyes to mine. "Would you?" She blushes. "Try therapy?"

My brow arches. "Are you asking me to?"

"I'm asking if you *would*."

I frown as I slowly nod. "I think so."

"Then I'm asking you to," she says quietly. "Not because I'm scared of any of them, even Demon…"

Yeah, her PUSSY is scared of us…scared of how much it fuckin' likes us…

Shut the fuck up.

Evelina clears her throat. "This isn't a dealbreaker here. Seriously. I just really want what's best for you."

I smile curiously at her. "Why is that, princess?"

She rolls her eyes. "Because I love you. Duh."

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EVELINA

“AGAIN. From the diagonal. *Let it breathe*, Evelina! Don’t rush it!”

My muscles scream as Madame Kuzmina circles me like a shark smelling blood in the water. Her eyes follow my every movement, critiquing in real time.

“Yes, like that…good. Hold the *développé* a hair longer. Let them see it, let them enjoy it…*good*.”

My leg muscles tense. Focus churns through my bloodstream.

“Now close—good. That's clean. The balance happens *before* the turn, not as part of it. Don’t fling the arms, *place them*. Sharp here, not frantic. Better. Again.”

I end up doing the entirety of the Black Swan solo/coda twice more under her scrutinizing gaze.

“That was good, Evelina,” she nods. “Quite good. You’ve found a maturity in the last couple of months I don’t believe I’ve seen in your work before.”

Well, *shit*.

Did the Earth just stop turning?

Because I do believe Madame Kuzmina just complimented my dancing. And on the Kuzmina scale, that was a freaking *rave* review.

I grin as I push stray hairs out of my face and gulp from my water bottle.

“Thank you, Madame,” I smile. “I appreciate it.”

She nods, twirling the rings on her fingers which always make me imagine her as fortune teller. Then she peers at me closely, almost suspiciously.

“You’ve been training elsewhere? An outside coach?”

I blink. “What? No, definitely not.”

Madame taps her chin with one ringed finger, still looking as if she’s trying to pry out my secrets.

Then slowly, her face clears and she smiles.

“Ah. You have a boyfriend.”

Jesus. *Is* she a fortune teller?

My face heats.

“I…” I bite my lip. “Yeah, I do.”

“I knew it.”

I roll my eyes. “Are you actually saying that *love* makes you a better dancer?”

She snorts. “Of course not, Evelina.”

Her brow arches almost imperceptibly as she leans closer.

“But getting *fucked* well does.”

* * *

TWO HOURS LATER, after I’ve put out the fire that used to be my face, and everyone else has left, I’m back on stage, going over the Black Swan piece again.

The Zakharova *just* did *Swan Lake* a little over a year ago, and Naomi *killed it* as the lead. But there’s a performance in a few months of some crowd favorites for a special audience of VIP benefactors, and Madame K asked

me to give it a shot. I want it to be *perfect*, particularly since it's not the sort of role she *ever* lets me do.

I nail the ending and then exhale in a whoosh. Sweat sheens my skin. My body sags, shoulder rolling forward as I slowly stretch out my back.

The slow clap coming from the darkness of the theater jolts me upright in a nanosecond. My heart lurches into my throat as I stab my gaze into the shadows, tensing when I see a figure slowly emerging.

"*Vaughn*?" I say quietly.

"Try again."

I shudder, slowly backing away.

Why does that voice sound familiar?

I glance behind me, to where my gear is heaped at the side of the stage. In a flash, I bolt over and yank the little keychain-sized can of pepper spray out of the side pocket of my bag that Milena has *insisted* that I carry for the last…well, as long as I've known her.

I whirl, brandishing it at the shadowy figure as he approaches the stage.

"Stay the *fuck* back!" I snarl, reaching for my phone, too. "I don't know how you got in here, but you've got three seconds to get out before I call the police."

"Ahh, but I don't think you want to do that, *Evelina*," he murmurs, pausing just beyond the glow of the lights at the front of the stage.

How does he know my name?

"Because if you *were* to call the police, you would find yourself in the awkward position of having to explain why you were *there* when Andrés Torvallés was murdered, and yet have never once come forward."

This is impossible.

Just as I say it to myself again, like a protective incantation, the impossible becomes reality and Andrés Torvallés steps out of the shadows.

He smiles darkly at me, his eyes glinting with savage amusement. I struggle for breath, my hands shaking.

"*I*—"

"Behold Lazarus, back from the dead," he growls, winking. "Surprised?"

I swallow numbly, blinking as I stand there shaking, still holding the pepper spray out in front of me.

"I…I don't understand," I choke. "You… He *killed* you."

Andrés chuckles. "You *assumed* he did. Did you actually see him do it?"

He smiles coldly and steps a little further into the light. For the first time I can see that his face is bruised, with a small bandage covering perhaps stitches above his left eyebrow.

"But…Vaughn—"

I shudder, trying to think. But it feels like years ago at this point. I remember Vaughn yanking Andrés out of the car, the knife flashing, the mad chase through the woods before he pinned me to the tree with his bloody hand around—

"*Blood*," I choke, shaking my head. "There was so much blood."

"Well, that was *his* blood. And unintended. But it certainly sold the illusion."

The illusion.

What is happening.

"I…" I swallow. "I don't—"

"Your little boyfriend and I have…*an arrangement*." His eyes darken as he raises a hand and gingerly fingers his brow next to the bandage. "His recent uninvited visit notwithstanding," he mutters.

"Arrangement," I say flatly.

He smiles. “I think you’re familiar with the complicated relationship sons sometimes have with their fathers, yes?”

My mouth tightens.

“Our arrangement was mutually beneficial,” he shrugs. “Vaughn wanted control of the Knightsblood board. I wanted to assume a throne my father was *never* going to give me.”

“Why wouldn’t your father—”

“Because he was trying to kill me.” Andrés says crisply. “Now, factor in that my father was responsible for the death of your boyfriend’s mentor, Stellan Lourde, and Vaughn and I came to an easy understanding. He’d help me fake my own death to slip out from under my father’s all-seeing gaze and be free to put my own plans into action. With me gone, he’d get his seat on the board. And when the time came, I’d even let him pull the trigger on my father, for vengeance’s sake.”

My mouth drops open. “But—I—he’s never told me any of—”

“No, I imagine he wouldn’t have,” Andrés says in a bored tone. “That was part of our arrangement, too. You see, we’d planned for him to come ‘murder’ me while I was with…” he winks lecherously at me. “*Company*.”

Bile rises in my throat as I remember his hands trying to shove their way under my skirt.

“The point was to have a witness to be able to testify to a masked man slaughtering me, which would lend weight to the whole thing and convince my father that it was real. But what I didn’t plan on,” he growls, “was *you*.”

His eyes narrow. “*You*, it would seem, were the reason for Vaughn’s…*above and beyond* reaction that night. Cutting him with my knife wasn’t part of the plan, either. But the voracity in which he came at me took me by surprise.” He smirks at me. “But I now understand why seeing me in that position with *you* turned him into a beast.”

My head spins as it all hits me like a slap.

Andrés steps a little closer to the front of the stage, his brow furrows. “But you’re wondering why I’m *here*, talking to you now.”

I nod quietly, my heart thudding against my ribs.

“Well, Evelina, unfortunately, those original plans have *changed*. You see, as you might have heard, my father had a *terrible* accident.” He clucks his tongue and crosses himself. “Such a tragedy, to 'fall' off a yacht when 'intoxicated'.”

His cold smile tells me there as nothing accidental about what happened to Diego on that yacht.

“Which means it’s now time for me to return from the dead and claim what is mine.”

I swallow, gripping the pepper spray tighter. “Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because I now find myself with a small problem.” His eyes narrow at me. “It’s come to my attention that my father had you running around looking for a bastard heir that I was never told about. And as I prepare to assume his throne, well…” He smiles viciously. “I would *very much* like to meet this half-brother.”

A chill ripples down my spine.

He doesn’t want a family reunion. He wants to ensure his claim to the Torvallés throne is uncontested.

He sighs. “I know you’ve worked hard to find my father’s bastard. But all this time, the answer was right in front of you.” He smirks. “Or I would imagine, frequently *on top of you*,” he grins viciously. “*Vaughn* knows who it is. He’s always known. And you’re going to ask him for me.”

I swallow thickly. “Why would I do that?” I breathe.

“Because I took his vengeance from him when I killed my father myself,” he growls. “Which I imagine will make him not so inclined to give me the name of this half-brother of mine. So *you* will be asking him.

Andrés slides his phone from his pocket.

“Oh, and if you don’t… They die.”

He taps the screen, bringing up a video.

And pure horror shatters me.

“*NO!*” I yell, dropping to my knees.

On screen, Roman and Val are tied to two chairs in a windowless room, gagged and struggling, bleeding heavily.

My eyes rip to his, my face caving. “Please!” I scream. “Let them go! Don’t hurt them!!”

Andrés chuckles to himself as he tucks the phone back in his pocket.

“I’d love nothing more than to send them on their way, Evelina.” He sighs, and I go still when he pulls a gun out from his jacket pocket. “But that’s going to depend on how convincing you can be.”

He sets the gun on the edge of the stage and shoves it skittering over until it bumps into my pointe shoes.

I quickly snatch up the gun in both hands and level it at him.

Andrés laughs quietly.

“You’re not going to shoot me.”

“The fuck I won’t!” I spit. “Let them go! *Now*!”

He grins widely. “Oh, Evelina.” He shakes his head. “So innocent. I mean you’re not going to shoot me because *it’s not loaded*.” He sighs. “Do I look stupid? The magazine is back there.” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “Seat 5H.”

Andrés gazes unblinkingly at me.

“Here’s what's going to happen, Evelina. I’m going to walk out of here. When I’m gone, and *only* when I’m gone, you’re going to dance your way off that stage and get those bullets, and then you’re going to go see that boyfriend of yours—he’s still at his office—and you’re going to tell *him* to

tell *you* who that fucking heir is," he hisses. "I would be *very* persuasive, unless you'd like to buy two fewer Christmas presents this year."

My world caves in on me.

"Find me that heir, Evelina. Or I'll make you watch Roman and Val die. You have one hour."

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VAUGHN

"THERE'S the small matter of compensation."

My jaw grinds. "*For*?" I growl thickly.

Xavier d'Auvrelle clears his throat through the phone. "Bertrand, Jean, and Pierre all needed fairly extensive medical assistance after your brutality, Monsieur Bancroft."

"And I fail to see how that's my problem," I say thinly. "Monsieur d'Auvrelle, we have a saying in my country. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."

Xavier chuckles. "*Touch*é, Vaughn. *Touché.* Obviously I was hoping for a reaction. But you…s*urpassed expectations,*" he murmurs. "In any case, my people are looking over your proposal now. I don't foresee us having any issues with what you've put forward, though, and I would expect you'll be hearing from me again shortly." He clears his throat. "I do hope you'll pass my sincere apologies to Ms. Nikitin for the…*subterfuge*?"

As it turns out, Xavier's "indecent proposal" was a test, meant to measure my drive for success against my merit as a man. Should I have agreed to let him touch Evelina—*not* that that would have happened in a million years—our proposed deal would have been immediately passed on.

I was *meant* to show my "honor" by refusing. Unfortunately for Xavier, he *vastly* underestimated the fury and wrath that would come alongside that honor.

“I’ll consider it,” I growl quietly.

Xavier chuckles. “Well, hope that you do. And I hope she appreciates the sort of man she’s bound herself to.”

Oh I don’t think she’s under any illusions about who and what I am…

“Again, Vaughn, my apologies for the dramatics. But I’ve always believed that in our world, a man’s heart and honor matter more than his wallet and greed.”

He takes a deep breath.

“Monsieur Bancroft, the d’Auvrelle family looks forward to a mutually beneficial relationship with the Obsidian Syndicate.”

***

“You’re *sure*.”

A bit later, Gideon sighs heavily on the other end of the line. “Positive. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I say tightly, exhaling heavily. “Just—*shit*.”

“You were hoping it wasn’t true?”

I nod. “I figured it was. But I was hoping for a miracle,” I sigh.

Fuck.

I drum my fingers on the edge of my desk.

“He’s going to fucking hate me for this, isn’t he?”

Gideon exhales. “I doubt it will be a fun conversation—”

The door to my home office suddenly bangs open. For a fraction of a second, when I see Evelina standing there with a wild look in her eyes, my dick misreads the situation and immediately jumps to the conclusion that she’s here to play.

…but then I see the gun in her shaking hands, pointed right at me.

“Gideon,” I mutter quietly. “I’m going to have to call you back.”

Evelina is shaking like a leaf, her trembling hands making the barrel of the gun jump wildly. I hang up and slip my phone into my jacket pocket.

Her face crumples, her lip quivering as tears bead in her eyes.

“*I’m sorry,*” she chokes, her voice breaking.

“Is that loaded?” I growl quietly.

She nods quickly.

“What’s going on, baby,” I murmur, keeping my hands flat and spread on the desk in front of me.

Evelina chokes back a shudder, her throat bobbing. “Diego Torvallés’s heir,” she blurts, her wide eyes stabbing into mine. “I need to know who it is. *Right now!*”

My jaw tenses. “What do you mean, Diego’s—”

“I know you know, Vaughn!!” she blurts, sucking in a lungful of air. “Please, just *tell me* who it is, okay?! Just tell me!”

She’s wound so tight, a car horn outside might have her jerking that trigger.

And with that barrel swinging all over the place in my direction, I’m not sure that’s a roulette wheel I’m willing to spin.

She flinches as I stand slowly, keeping my hands in view. “Tell me what’s going on, princess,” I murmur.

“Goddammit, Vaughn!” She chokes as tears flood her face. “Just tell me!”

“Is this *you* asking,” I growl, “or someone else.”

“Does it matter?!” she shrieks.

“It very much does.”

I step out from behind my desk, hands still up, and start to move toward her.

Evelina chokes out a wrenching sob, the gun still wildly shaking in her trembling hands.

“*Dammit*, Vaughn!” she screams. “STOP! Just tell me who it—”

“You saw Andrés.”

The second I say it and see the way she flinches, I know I’m right.

“Evelina—”

“I don’t *care* that you helped him fake his own death!” she wails. “I don’t *care* that you didn’t tell me—”

“I didn’t want to involve you,” I growl, walking toward her. “I didn’t want—”

“*Vaughn*!” she screeches, wildly brandishing the gun at me as tears run down her face. “I need that name, *now*!! I don’t have any time! *He’s going to kill Val and Roman*!”

I keep walking.

“He’s got them!” she screams frantically. “He’s got them both tied up, and if you don’t give me that name, he’s going to—”

“He’s not going to do anything, princess,” I murmur.

I take another step closer.

Then another.

“*Goddammit*!!” she chokes, jamming the gun at me. “*STOP*. *WALKING*!”

“Or what.”

I take another step. She starts backing away, but quickly hits the doorframe behind her.

I don’t stop advancing.

She chokes, her face crumpling as I step right into her space, until that shaking gun stops trembling and presses against the underside of my jaw.

“You’re not going to shoot me, princess,” I say quietly.

“*My brother*—!” She breaks, crying as the tears stream down her cheeks. The metal of the gun drags across my throat. “*Your* brother—”

“I’ve had them both under near-constant surveillance ever since your father dragged them into a basement,” I growl. “They’re both *fine*.”

“*You don’t know that!*” she chokes. “You—”

I slide my phone from my pocket, tap a contact, and put the call on speaker, my eyes locked with Evelina's.

“Mr. Bancroft,” Thomas says through the phone. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Status update.”

“Of course, sir. Mr. Nikitin and your brother are enjoying a dinner date at Atera and have just ordered dessert. Creme brûlée to share, I believe.”

Evelina's body curls in on itself like she’s just been punched in the stomach.

“Thank you, Thomas.”

I hang up and slip the phone back into my pocket. I lift my hand and wrap my fingers around the barrel of the gun, gently pulling it from her shaking grip.

“I will never let *anything* happen to anyone important to me,” I growl quietly. “That includes my brother *and* yours.”

I slip the gun into my belt, then wrap my arms around her.

“And that *very much* includes the woman I love.”

She shatters, her fists clinging to my shirt as she sobs into my chest.

“*He showed me a video—*”

“Whatever he showed you was fake, princess. You know what AI can do now. And you just heard Thomas. Our brothers are currently sharing creme fucking brûlée.”

She shudders, gasping for air. “*He—he—*”

“What he did,” I rumble, “was take a *giant* fucking step too far.”

Getting into bed with a snake like Andrés was a lapse in judgement for me.

But threatening what’s *mine*?

That’s a fatal fucking error for him.

I grab Evelina's hand and storm out of the office, pulling her after me.

“Come on.”

“Where are we going?” she asks, her hand tight in mine.

“To give Andrés his gun back,” I growl. “At least, the bullets inside of it.”

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EVELINA

ANDRÉS LOOKS ALARMINGLY relaxed when Vaughn kicks in the door of his luxury hotel suite where he's been staying under a fake name.

"*Ah-ah-ah*," he says with a toothy, predatory smile, standing from the couch as Vaughn storms across the room, pointing his gun at Andrés chest. "You might want to dial back the hostilities."

"Oh?" Vaughn hisses. "What makes you so delusional to think there wouldn't be consequences for threatening *her*," he rasps, shoving the gun in Andrés face. "Or for sending her after me with a loaded fucking *gun*?" His jaw tenses. "Did you really think she'd—"

"Blanks, Vaughn," Andrés sighs. "They're just blanks. Though if we're being honest, I *was* rather hoping she'd pull that trigger anyway." He grins maliciously. "I can't imagine any couple survives one of them trying to *shoot* the other one."

Vaughn's jaw ticks as he looks at the gun. He flicks the safety on it and then slides out the clip.

His lips curl into a snarl as he slams it back in and then throws it on the coffee table in front of Andrés.

"*You sick bastard*," I hiss as Andrés chuckles.

"Oh, it was all in fun, Evelina," he smiles darkly. "And they're just blanks—"

“Well, these ones aren’t.”

The smile drops from Andrés’ face when Vaughn pull his *own* gun out of his jacket and levels it at the Spaniard’s chest.

“Before you do something reckless and stupid, Mr. Bancroft,” Andrés spits, his eyes narrowing. “I would suggest you let me speak.”

Vaughn smiles darkly. “What makes you think I'm interested in *anything* that comes from your fucking mouth.”

Andrés cocks a brow. “Blow my head off, and you’ll never know.”

“I’m willing to take that chance,” Vaughn hisses.

“But are you willing to bet *her* on that chance?” Andrés asks pointedly. “How about you take that gun out of my face, and we'll talk.”

Vaughn glares at him, keeping the gun where it is for another few seconds. Then he slowly lifts it away but doesn’t holster it.

“*Talk*,” he grunts at Andrés.

Andrés smiles smoothly. “Where should I start?”

“How about Diego being is dead,” Vaughn growls. “We had a *deal*, Andrés.”

“Yes, *had*.” Andrés touches the bandage by his eyebrow lightly. “Past tense.”

Vaughn rolls his eyes. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Andrés smiles. “You seemed…*out of sorts* when we argued the other night.” His brow furrows. “Goodness, wasn’t that the *same* night that Evelina here was so viciously brutalized?”

“Go to hell,” I snap.

Andrés sneers in my direction. “Are you sure you’re safe with this man, Evelina? I mean, he stormed his way into your hospital room with *blood* all over his hands.” He clucks his teeth. “That doesn’t sound like a very healthy relation—”

“I’m guessing that was *your* blood?” I ask.

“It was indeed,” Andrés growls.

I smile broadly. “*Good*.”

“So our deal changed because I gave you some *stitches*?” Vaughn snaps.

Andrés chuckles, and his eyes glint wickedly. “No, Vaughn, our deal changed because *before*, we were balanced. “His twisted smile pulls wider. “But we no longer are, are we? You have a *weak spot* now,” Andrés growls under his breath. “A pressure point that can be…*pushed*.”

His gaze slides past Vaughn to me, and he smiles coldly.

“I’m sorry, Vaughn, but that’s just the truth of the matter now. We *were* even. Now *I* have the upper hand.”

“You can’t just go back on—”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want, *Evelina*,” Andrés snaps, standing abruptly just as Vaughn’s arm shoots out to stop me from storming over. “You and your family’s, what, twenty-year ‘empire’? Thirty?” He snorts. “Even the Obsidian Syndicate, with its history, is *nothing* compared to the centuries-old dynasty that I now control.”

“Exactly what the fuck do you want,” Vaughn spits through clenched teeth.

The other man chuckles as he walks over to the bar cart, pours himself a sherry, and brings it to his lips.

“I’m coming back from the dead, Vaughn, and I’ll be wanting my seat on the board back. Unfortunately, there are no open chairs.” His eyes narrow. “The Obsidian Syndicate is hereby *done* with whatever plans you had with Knightsblood. And I do mean *done*, down to a very personal level.”

Andrés clears his throat.

“You and anyone involved with the Syndicate will be *barred* from campus. Should you or any of your little band of unhinged psychopaths procreate, your heirs will *also* find the gates closed.” He smiles coldly. “Your unborn children, Mr. Bancroft, have no place at Knightsblood.”

“I paid you a *substantial* amount of money, Andrés,” Vaughn murmurs.

Andrés grins. “*Sí*, you did. But, alas, plans change. What can I say. And as you know, there are no refunds in our world.”

Vaughn shakes his head. “You think stealing from me is smart, Andrés? The option of me blowing your fucking head off right now is still on the table.”

The other man chuckles. “No, I don’t think it is. Because I have a contingency plan. A *dead man’s switch*, as they say.” He grins. “Let me tell you what is *actually* going to happen. “You’ll leave Knightsblood and vacate that seat on the board. You’ll cease exerting any influence over the remaining members of that board, and forever remove yourself and your future bloodline from the Knightsblood campus. Furthermore, you *will* tell me the name of my father’s bastard. *In exchange* for all of that, as well as the money you’ve already paid me…”

His eyes slide to me.

“I won’t destroy her life.”

A low, dark growl emanates from Vaughn’s chest as he moves in front of me.

“That’s the second time you’ve threatened her,” he says quietly.

Andrés sighs. “This isn’t personal. It’s simply business. And in business, especially mine, weakness must be exploited. Not doing so *is* weakness in and of itself.” He walks over to a side table and picks up a manila folder.

“This,” he murmurs, turning toward us, “Is the evidence that will put Evelina in prison for kidnaping, torture, and attempted murder.”

“*Excuse me*?” I choke.

Andrés smiles as he walks over and drops it on the table in front of us.

“Several people saw us talking on the Knightsblood campus. Several others saw you get into my car with me and drive away, not to mention the CCTV footage.” His lips curl. “Your DNA is all over that car, with traces of my blood.”

I frown. “In what world does that make—”

“There’s also the warehouse in Brooklyn rented under your name.”

My face pales.

“You were clever enough to use shell companies, of course,” Andrés sighs. “But any decent forensic accountant could trace the money back to you. And I imagine the authorities will have several questions indeed about the samples of my blood that will be found all over the small, windowless room where you kept me these last four months while I’ve been presumed dead.”

I swallow, my mouth going dry as Vaughn picks up the folder and starts to leaf through it. I turn to him, hoping to see an eye roll.

But he just stares at the pages, his jaw clenching tighter.

“Motive?” Vaughn finally growls. “You think the police will believe that a young woman like her with zero criminal past would randomly kidnap someone like *you*, or anyone for that matter, and lock you up in a basement for months?”

Andrés smiles coldly. “They will when they see the sworn affidavits testifying to her insanity and history of violence that her family’s been hiding.”

I stare at him. “*What*?”

He tsks. “You know, I thought *I* had a bad relationship with *my* father. But the speed with which Pavel agreed to my offer to free him from that Russian situation in exchange for his sworn testimony was *breathtaking*.”

Pain stabs through me like a blade, twisting in my chest as my throat squeezes shut.

Oh my God.

I was wrong.

I’ve been trying to tell myself for *months* that even with what he did, no matter what else, he was still *my father*. That we were family, and family doesn’t turn on family.

Roman tried to warn me, and now I know he was right. And when it clicks, I don't even feel the need to accuse Andrés of lying.

Because I know in my heart he's not.

"There's also the testimony from your ex, Ethan," Andrés sighs. "Now, credit where credit is due, he initially heartily refused. But he's got that lovely new fiancée, and, well…" He smiles and spreads his hands. "He quickly saw reason." He sighs. "Like I said, it's just the way the game works."

The room is silent. My hand tightens on Vaughn's arm as I cling to him, feeling his muscles clench under my grip.

"So," Andrés murmurs. "I'll take the name of my half-brother now."

Vaughn smiles darkly. "All that talk," he growls. "All that posturing and clapping yourself on the back for being so clever." Vaughn's eyes suddenly narrow. "*There is no heir*, you fucking idiot."

Andrés grins. "Don't play chicken with me, Vaughn. I'll send the contents of this envelope to every DA, tip hotline, and news agency in New York. She'll be behind bars within the *hour*."

Vaughn just keeps smiling.

"It's all a lie," he hisses. "A story based on rumor and bullshit, started by *me* to fuck with your father."

Andrés' smile falters.

"I planted that fairy tale in his head to waste his time and resources," Vaughn shrugs. "Let me guess, you only heard about this heir when *he* told you about it, right before you killed him?"

The smile drops entirely.

"Keep pulling on that thread if you want." Vaughn chuckles. "I can tell you where it's going to lead. You'll eventually find out that about twenty-nine years ago, Victoria King and your father happened to be staying at the same hotel in Madrid. You'll even probably dig up the CCTV footage of the two of them having drinks together at the bar, and the *point* of all of this is to

lead anyone looking into believing that Carson King is your father's bastard heir." He shrugs. "Now, I truly don't know if your dad fucked Carson's mother, but I do know, unequivocally, that there weren't any children that came of it." He smiles coldly at Andrés. "Victoria King underwent a voluntary sterilization after Carson was born."

Andrés' jaw ticks.

"But," Vaughn smiles. "If you'd like more concrete proof that Carson isn't your half-brother, I'm *sure* he'd be more than thrilled to leave a DNA sample all over your front door."

Andrés's face darkens.

Vaughn shrugs. "There are *forty* women who've come forward over the years accusing Diego of being the father of their children. I've got the list if you want, but I've already gone through it hoping to get leverage against your father and none of the accusations has any substance. *You do not have a half sibling*."

The seconds tick by as Andrés face darkens even more. He brings the glass in his hand to his mouth and knocks back the rest of his sherry.

"I'll take that list."

Vaughn shrugs. "It's all yours. But it's a lesson in futility."

The seconds tick by.

"*Fine*," Andrés finally growls. "But the rest of the arrangement stands. I don't destroy Evelina's life, and in exchange, you *walk away* from Knightsblood and all your plans there. I've even taken the liberty of drawing us up a contract."

He pulls a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket and drops it on the table between us. Then he holds up a pen, grinning.

Slowly, doubt begins to sink icily into my body.

What if Vaughn doesn't agree?

What if what we have isn’t worth more than his plans involving the Syndicate?

He’s told me how the Syndicate is everything. His family, his life. I’m… what?

A plaything? A distraction? Even “girlfriend” isn't much when you look at it from that perspective.

Andrés smiles. “You give me your board seat, your power at Knightsblood, and I keep the money you’ve already paid me. In exchange, I won’t appear in court sobbing about how brutally your girlfriend treated me during my captivity.”

My heart tightens. How could he *possibly* choose me over—

“Deal.”

There’s *zero* hesitation as the word falls from his lips. He just takes the pen, bends down, and signs his name at the bottom of the contact.

I stare open-mouthed as he drops the pen to the table and stands upright, locking eyes with a similarly shocked-looking Andrés.

“There’s your contract. If you go back on it, or if you *ever* threaten her again, I’ll cut your fucking head off.”

Andrés dips his chin. “A pleasure doing business with you both.”

“Let’s go.”

Vaughn grabs my hand and pulls me after him as he walks from the room.

We make it all the way downstairs and out onto the street before I can’t take it anymore.

“*Wait*,” I blurt, my hand darting out to grab his wrist as I stop walking. “Just…wait. Why did you do that?”

He arches a brow “Do what?”

“That deal!” I blurt. “Why would you trade all of that just for—”

“Because I fucking love you, Evelina. I *have* loved you since the night you ran from me through the woods, and every fucking day, and every fucking night ever since then.”

Then he grabs me tightly, yanks me against his hard body, and crushes his mouth to mine.

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47

VAUGHN

"ANYTHING TO DRINK, SIR?"

I glance up at the waiter and shake my head. "Just sparkling water, thanks."

"Shall I bring over the wine list?"

"No. No alcohol for the table."

He nods and disappears. Evelina's soft hand lands on mine, and she gives me a puzzled look.

"I'm trying to make a good impression with your brother," I say, squeezing her hand.

"Well, he won't say it out loud," she grins, "but it won't be lost on him."

I nod. Then my brow pinches as I glare at the table in front of me. "Do you really think I should still tell Val?" I turn to her. "I mean, about…well, all of it."

"If it was me, I'd want to know."

I sigh. "He's going to hate me for it."

She makes a face. "He'll be upset, yeah," she says gently. "But he'll understand why you're telling him. I mean, it's the truth. I know Val, and I know he'd rather hear the truth than be fed a lie, even if that truth hurts."

I nod. Then I turn, cup her face, and lean in to kiss her softly.

“Sorry if I'm interrupting,” a voice growls.

Shit.

Wonderful first impression.

Evelina quickly pulls away from me, biting back a sheepish grin as we turn to see her brother and mine standing there with the maître d’.

“Hi, Rome,” she smiles as we both stand. She comes around the table and gives her brother a big hug. I turn to Val and nod stiffly as I shake his hand. Then we swap, Evelina hugging my brother and me shaking Roman’s hand.

“Thanks for coming,” I say to him.

“What, not show and give you more ammunition to drive a wedge between Evie and me?”

“Rommmme,” Evelina sighs. “C’mon. You promised.”

I shake my head. “Roman, I have zero interest in coming between you and your sister. Just like I don’t imagine you have any interest in trying to come between me and my brother.”

Roman smirks. “I think you’ve been doing a bang-up job of that on your own.”

“*Chill*,” Val mutters, elbowing him in the ribs. He sighs and then smiles at all of us. “I’m glad we’re doing this. I think it’s important.”

“Me too,” Eveline grins.

“Well,” Val clears his throat. “Shall we sit?”

Everyone takes their seats. Suddenly, Val frowns as he glances around.

“There’s only four chairs.”

Val’s mouth thins as he looks at me. “Where the fuck is Dad’s chair?” he growls. “He’ll be here any—”

“He’s not coming,” I say quietly.

“*Excuse me*?” he growls. “Why the fuck *not*, Vaughn?”

Here we go.

I clear my throat. “What I’m about to tell you is going to make me the bad guy.”

“What the *fuck*…” Val hisses.

“Val,” Evelina says quietly. “Just…listen to him, please?”

He scowls, but drags his gaze back to me. “Fine, I'll bite. *What* is going to make you the bad guy?”

So, so much.

I draw in a breath and exhale it slowly. “Morgan isn’t who you think he is, Val.”

My brother’s face darkens. “You have *got* to be joking, Vaughn,” he hisses. “If you don’t want a relationship with our father, *fine*. But *I* fucking *do*!”

“No, you don’t,” I growl. “Trust me.”

He barks a laugh. “Why would I? You obviously can’t let go of your anger toward him. And dude, I won’t ever try to tell you that your pain isn’t valid. But *I’m fucking trying*, okay!? I’ve been *trying* to get to know him, and spend time with him, and make up for all this lost time. So *fuck you* for trying to sabotage—”

“Has he told you about his other family yet?” I snap. “Has that come up?”

Val’s eyes glint as sharp as mine as they narrow on me.

“Whatever the fuck you’re trying to pull, you are *way* over the fucking line—”

“Here.”

I pull an envelope out of my pocket and drop it in front of him.

“I’m not opening that.”

“Okay,” I growl. “But it’s the proof, since you don’t believe me.” I nod at it. “Morgan got himself a new family, Val. A wife and two boys, way down in

Georgia.” I smile coldly. “He got himself a do-over.”

Val scoffs. “You’re unbelievable. The man is allowed to have a *life*, motherfucker. Yeah, his first one fell apart. He was an addict, and a shit father, and he lost both his kids, and his wife.” He glares at me. “So what if he got sober and wanted to start over? Is he not *ever* allowed to be happy—”

“If he didn’t tell you about the other family,” I say dryly, “then I'm guessing he *definitely* didn’t tell you about walking out on them.”

Val turns to stone. “The fuck do you mean he walked out,” he says icily.

I sigh. “I mean he left them. Abandoned them. But I guess that wasn’t in the ‘Dad comes back from the dead’ brochure, was it?”

Val’s jaw grinds. “I can’t imagine he just *left* for no fucking reason,” he growls.

“Oh, there was a reason.”

Pain stabs into me. I’m about to hurt someone I love with a brutal truth.

“None of them was a match,” I say quietly. “I mean, tough luck, because it *really* seems like Morgan’s entire impetus for having a second family after he’d fucked the first one up was that he needed one. But then, lightning strikes, and Morgan spots *your* fucking photo in *New York Magazine*. So he cleans himself up, comes to the big city, reaches out to his long-lost—”

“*What* match,” Val snaps. “Vaughn, what the *fuck* are you talking about?!”

“He wants your fucking kidney, Val.”

My brother freezes. His jaw drops open a little, and his Adam's apple bobs heavily as he blinks.

“The fuck did you just—”

“Morgan’s got acute organ failure from his decades of heavy drug use,” I say gently. “He’s about to lose both kidneys and have to go on dialysis for whatever life he’s got left. No transplant list in the *world* is going to give a former heroin addict a fucking kidney.” My mouth tightens. “Val, I’m very

fucking sorry," I grit through clenched teeth. "But Morgan's only been cultivating a relationship with you because your kidney is near-perfect for a transplant. Remember that DNA test you took together? It wasn't a DNA test. It was to see if you were a match."

"*Jesus*," Roman says quietly, his face paling as he sits back in his chair. He turns to my brother and reaches out to plant a hand on his shoulder. "*Val*," he says quietly. "Baby, I'm right here—"

"Fuck," Val rasps. He looks away, blinking and shaking his head. "*Fuck*," he growls louder. He stands abruptly from the table, shoving his fingers through his hair and pacing the floor before he abruptly sits again.

"Okay," he nods. "Okay, fine. Fuck it. I wish he'd just fucking said something, but if he needs a kidney—"

"Val."

"No, fuck this," he snarls. "And fuck *you* for making him such a fucking villain!"

"*Val*," I growl.

"Seriously. *Fuck YOU*, man," he seethes. "You can hate the guy, but trying to get between him and a fucking life-saving transplant is fucking diabolical—"

"Goddamn, Val," I hiss. "Will you listen—"

"He's our *father*!!"

"*Val*—"

"And if my *father* needs a goddamn kidney, he's going to get a fucking—"

"*He's not your fucking father*!"

The look on my brother's face when that flies out of my mouth almost kills me. It's like I've just stabbed him in the heart. His whole face crumples.

My own chest tightens as I clear my throat. "I'm sorry," I grit out quietly. "I thought about not telling you, because I knew it would hurt—"

“How long.” Val’s eyes are pure poison as they pierce mine. “How fucking long have you known.”

Evelina’s hand slides across the table on my other side and squeezes mine.

“Years, Val,” I say quietly. “I’ve known for years.”

He stares at me, blinking slowly. “You’ve known he wasn’t our father for—”

“Oh, he's *my* father,” I murmur. “But not yours.”

Val exhales slowly, his eyes glazing over as he drops back in his chair.

“*Wow*,” he breathes. “Just fuckin’ *wow*.”

Roman’s face crumples. “Val—”

“I need a cigarette,” my brother mutters.

Roman slides off his chair and crouches next to Val, putting an arm around his shoulders. “I’m right here—”

We all jolt when Val’s fist slams down on the table, rattling the silverware and making water splash from the glasses. “I *need a fucking*—!”

His face squeezes and scrunches up tight. He whirls on me, his eyes wild as they stab into me.

“What the *fuck* do you mean he’s not my father,” he seethes.

“Val, I’m so fucking sorry—”

“I don’t *want* your fucking sorries,” he snarls. “I want a cigarette, and I want to know who the *fuck* my actual dad is!”

I take a deep breath.

“Your father is Diego Torvallés.”

I thought the look on his face when I told him Morgan *wasn’t* his father would be the one that killed me. But when I see the horrified shock on my brother’s face, it’s like my heart is ripping open.

Val sits slumped in his chair, his eyes staring through the table and his hand clenching into a fist over and over. Roman wraps his arms around my brother and holds him tightly.

I breathe deeply, gripping Evelina's hand.

"You know Mom turned tricks," I say quietly. "But before things got real bad and meth took her looks, she was a stunner, and she'd do high-end escort work to feed her addiction." My jaw tightens. "Mainly in Pittsburgh or Philly, but the real money and the big spenders were in New York. And on one of her trips here, she got booked by a high roller client who was visiting from Spain."

Val's face pales.

"D-did Dad…Morgan…" he frowns. "I mean, he obviously didn't know—"

"Oh yeah, he knew," I mumble. "He and Mom tried to shake Diego down for money about a year after you were born. They weren't the first. When I dug into it, there were something like forty-five women over about a ten-year period that did the same, and he paid them all without ever looking into their claims. He just wanted them to go away."

Shit.

I realize exactly how terrible that sounds just as Val's chair loudly shoves back from the table.

"I need to get the fuck out of here before I explode."

He storms away from the table as the rest of us stand.

"What the *fuck*, man?" Roman hisses, turning to glare at me.

"Rome," Evelina says, her voice breaking. "Was he supposed to *not* tell him?"

"I…" Roman grits his teeth. "I mean, *Jesus Christ*, Vaughn."

Evelina frowns. "Roman, *come on.* He deserved to know! Don't shoot the messenger!"

Roman shakes his head. "I'll go find—"

“No. I’ll talk to him,” I growl.

Roman barks out a brittle laugh. “I think you’ve fucking said enough for one night, don’t you?”

“Roman!”

Evelina and her brother turn on each other, muttering quietly. I squeeze her shoulder and then leave the table and head outside.

Val is huddled against the wind, a cigarette he got fuck-knows-where between his lips as he vainly tries to coax fire from a lighter in his hands.

“I thought you quit.”

“*Don’t*,” he mutters.

Flick. Flick. Flick.

His thumb snaps the lighter over and over before he suddenly roars and whirls, throwing both lighter and cigarette into the gutter.

“FUCK YOU!” he bellows, storming toward me and jabbing a finger in my chest. “Fuck you for not telling me!!”

“I *wanted to*,” I hiss. “*Fuck*, did I want to.”

“Then why the fuck *didn’t* you?!” he screams, startling pedestrians as they walk past us. “Instead of letting me try and cultivate a fucking *relationship* with him!”

“Because I knew Morgan was the only father you were ever going to have!” I roar back. “And I’d already taken you away from him once, and…”

“And because you hate him.”

My blood pressure spikes. “*Yes*, but not just because he was a piece of shit when we were growing up,” I growl. “I hate that he let you go your whole childhood thinking that *he* was your father, when he knew he wasn’t! Because to me, that makes the abuse and the neglect even worse! He let you grow up thinking *your own father* was that big a piece of shit to you, when he *could* have lessened that hurt!” I roar. “He could have told you the goddamn truth, and then he’d just be a deadbeat piece of shit stepdad, not

your piece of shit *actual father*. He had the chance to do something hard and make a kid's life *slightly* less shitty, and he *didn't take it*."

I throw my head back, exhaling all the pain and venom inside as I look up at the steel and neon high above us.

"I love you, Val," I growl quietly. "You're my brother, and I would do *anything* for you, and I'm so fucking sorry."

I look at him, both of us shaking with emotion.

"Yeah," he growls, looking down at the pavement. "I'm sorry, too."

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48

EVELINA

"SOMEONE ORDER A LAVENDER-MOCHA FRAPPA-NIGHTMARE?"

I grin, whirling and then squealing as I almost tackle Val to the ground with the force of my hug.

"You're back!!"

He chuckles, hugging me awkwardly as he juggles the two to-go cups.

"Back in black, baby," he grins, winking at me. "Here."

My eyes light up as he hands me one of the cups. "Oh my *God*," I groan. "You know how much I love these."

He snorts. "I also know Milena has banned you from drinking them because they're full of sugar and caffeine, which do not play well with you."

I giggle.

"So, if she sees that, and she asks, you did *not* get it from me."

My lips pull into a wide grin. "*Deal*." I take a sip of the hot drink and groan. "*OhMyGodddd* that is so freaking good. Right?"

"Oh, this?" Val makes a face, lifting his to-go cup. "No, babygirl. This is black coffee. You know, because I'm a grown up?"

I give him the finger, and he cracks up before he slings a muscled arm around my shoulders. "I fuckin' missed you, Evie."

We’re the first ones in the alley behind the Mercury, where the dancers congregate before rehearsal, because we agreed to meet early to catch up.

“So how was the trip? How was the Grand Canyon? How was everything?! TELL ME EVERYTHING!!!”

“Dude,” he grins. “*One* sip and you’re already the fucking energizer bunny. I can see why Milena put her foot down on these.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

He chuckles as we both sit on the bottom step of the black metal fire escape.

“The trip was good. I…” He rolls his eyes. “I needed to get away from all of this for a while, you know?”

I nod, putting my hand on his arm. “I get it,” I say quietly.

Val sighs. “I really need to apologize for the last time you saw me.”

“Uh, no, you definitely do not.” I shake my head. “Like, actually. That was…”

“A lot to take in?” he finishes. “Which is putting it mildly.”

My mouth twists as I turn to him. “You okay?”

He nods. “I am. A week away in the desert, alone with my hot boyfriend?”

I make a gagging face. “You can spare me the details.”

He laughs. “Deal. But no, it was great. Cleansing, you know? A reset.” He exhales. “Still, it’s good to be back.”

“It’s good to *have* you back,” I sigh, resting my head affectionately on his shoulder. “I really did miss you, you know.”

“Missed me because I wasn't around to be Madame Kuzmina's usual emotional whipping boy, so the rest of you got a taste of what it’s like?”

I snort. “You bring that on yourself, dude.”

“Holy victim-blaming!”

I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean. You antagonize her.”

He grins. “*Yeaaah*. I do.”

“Well, to answer your question, I *actually* missed you, shocking as that may be.”

“I missed you too, Eves.” He winks at me, then clears his throat as his brow furrows. “So, uh, how is he?”

I roll my eyes. “You could *call him*, you know.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, I know. I mean, I will. I just…” he frowns. “I know you’re not supposed to shoot the messenger. But sometimes…*fuck*.” He exhales. “I don’t know if I’m madder that he dumped all that on me, or that he was right.”

I already heard the story. A little over a week ago, right after that dinner, sure enough, Morgan reached out to Val to “talk about something important.”

To no one's surprise, it was about the kidney donor match.

Val and Roman left New York *that very day* to go camping near the Grand Canyon for a week. And apparently, Morgan got the message loud and clear, because he’s disappeared off the face of the Earth again, and his number has been disconnected.

I mean, really… *Fuck that guy.*

“How is he, though?” Val mutters.

“Vaughn’s good,” I smile. “Misses you. Wants to talk to you.”

He nods, looking away. “Yup. Noted. While we're on the subject…”

Val and Vaughn aren’t the only siblings locked in a little bit of communication gridlock. Roman and I have *also* not been on the friendliest of terms, mostly because he can’t—or won’t—see why I’m with Vaughn.

But we’ll get there eventually. Just like I know Val and Vaughn will.

Sometimes you just need a break, even from the people you love.

Well, not *all* the people you love.

Like, me and Vaughn?

No breaks required.

No space needed.

I actually want to dig my nails into his skin and open him up to crawl inside to be *closer* to him.

And yes, I realize how *utterly psycho* that sounds.

“So, Vaughn’s good?” Val asks.

I grin. “You already asked me that.”

His mouth purses as he frowns. “Fuck.”

“He really is, though.” I glance sideways at Val. “If I tell you something, will you promise not to say anything?”

“Scout's honor.”

I snort. “I have a hard time seeing you as a Boy Scout.”

“So did they,” he grins. “Kicked out when I was ten because I’m so gangster. No, but seriously. What’s up with Vaughn?”

“He's started going to therapy.”

Val’s jaw drops.

“Holy *shit*,” he blurts. “That’s...incredible. How the fuck did you manage that?”

I grin. ”You sure you want to know?”

He groans. “Ew! Not anymore, I don’t! Fucking gross!”

I giggle. “Now, Val, when two grownups love each other very much—”

“*Please* do not finish that sentence. That's a visual I do not need.”

“Welcome to my world,” I laugh. “And I *lived* with the two of you!”

“Ohmigod, he’s back!!”

We look up to see Milena and Naomi shrieking at the top of the alley.

“You better finish that or get rid of the evidence,” Val snickers, nodding at my lavender mocha.

“You sure you don’t want some?”

“I have never been surer of anything,” he chuckles. Then his brow furrows. “Hey, are we all…I mean you and Roman, and me and Vaughn…” He frowns deeper. “We’re all going to be okay, right?”

“Do you love my brother?”

He cocks a brow. “Uh, obviously?”

“Do you love *your* brother?”

“Begrudgingly at times, but yes,” he grins.

“Well, I love *your* brother—”

“Evie, this is getting fucking weird.”

I roll my eyes. “And I love *my* brother. And you know what, Val? I love *you*, too. There. Now everyone loves everyone. It’s sweet, isn’t it?”

“Any sweeter and I'd puke, Evie.”

* * *

I’M *EXHAUSTED* by the time rehearsal is over. Even so, I tell Naomi and Lyra that I’ll have to catch up with them later, because I’m going to stay and work my Black Swan piece a few more times in preparation for the revue. I text Vaughn that I’ll be home late, then I get to it.

Two hours after *that*, “exhausted” isn’t the right word anymore. I could curl up on the stage and just…stay there. Physically, I’ve got nothing left in the tank.

A shower will have to wait until I get home, especially since the idea of taking one here *alone*, with no one else left in the building, freaks me out. I throw shorts and a hoodie over the leggings and t-shirt I've been dancing in, sling my dance bag over my shoulder, kill the lights, and then make my way to the back door of the theater and shoulder it open.

The scream chokes in my throat as the hand wraps like iron around my neck. Adrenaline explodes through my system as I'm yanked out the back door, my dance bag slipping off my shoulder before I'm slammed against the brick well.

Sheer terror slices through me as I look up into the faceless, hulking shape of the man all in black, wearing a ski mask over his face. His hand clenches tighter around my throat as he holds up a knife, glinting in the dim of the streetlight further up the alleyway.

"*Please!*" I choke through his grip on my throat. "Please don't—"

His face surges close to mine, so quickly that I flinch and shut my eyes.

"*I just have one. Fucking. Question*," he snarls.

I blink, shuddering as my pulse skips.

"*Are you going to be a good little whore for me.*"

The fear wrapped like ice around my heart shatters and melts, liquefying in my core and pooling between my thighs.

It's Vaughn.

Then heat blooms across my cheek.

It's Vaughn, and he just *slapped* me.

Not *hard*, but enough that it's clear he wants to play *rough*. I whimper as he squeezes my throat and drags the tip of the knife across my jawline.

"*I asked you a fucking question, slut.*"

"*Yes,*" I whimper, my legs quivering. "*Yes, I'll be a good little whore for you*."

“Get on your fucking knees.”

He lets go of my throat, grabs a hank of my hair, and violently shoves me to the ground. I groan as my kneecaps bite into the pavement, my breath catching sharply as he tugs my head back hard.

The jangle of his belt cuts through the sounds of the night, and I squeeze my thighs together.

Vaughn pushes his black jeans down over his hips, and suddenly, his swollen cock springs free.

I *moan* when he slaps my cheek again.

“Give me that fucking mouth, slut.”

I open my jaw wide as he grabs his cock and shoves it between my lips.

Fuck. Yes.

I know it’s deranged. There's still a part of me that is outright *horrified* by the way I behave with him, and things I need *from* him.

But that part of me can be as shocked as she wants. The rest of me *craves this*.

I gag as his huge cock rams into the back of my throat, choking me as I sputter and whimper and wrap my lips around it. My tongue swirls over the underside of his dick, teasing over every bulging vein as he drags his cock from my mouth only to shove it right back in.

I moan and slobber on his fat cock, spit and precum dripping from the corners of my mouth onto my hoodie as he grabs my hair and starts to *fuck* my face.

“Mmmm,” Vaughn growls. “Such a good little cocksucker I’ve caught. Open that throat, baby. Let me fuck this face like it’s a tight, wet pussy. Good girl.”

His hips thrust, his big cock ramming over my tongue and hitting the back of my throat. Lewd, wet, sloppy *gluck*ing sounds fill the alley as Vaughn pins the back of my head to the brick wall and does his very worst.

When he pulls out I gasp loudly, sucking in air and moaning as I look up at his masked face. Spit and drool drip from my chin and string from my bottom lip to the swollen head of his cock.

I cry out, whimpering as he yanks me up by the hair and slams me against the wall. A moan ripples in my throat as he drops to *his* knees, and twirls that vicious hunting knife in his hands.

Without any warning, he grabs the front of my shorts and leggings and yanks them away from my body. I whimper when he plunges the knife between them and my skin, the flat of the blade grazing against my hips and lower stomach before his arm jerks sharply.

He slices my leggings and shorts, then uses his hands to shred them away from my body. He yanks the ski mask up over his nose, and suddenly his face is delving between my quivering thighs.

"*Oh God…*"

I cry out, clawing at his hair as his tongue snakes over my clit. He growls into me, grabbing my hips and pinning me to the wall behind me as he *devours* my pussy. His wet tongue slides up and down, pushing deep into me and making me whine before his lips wrap around my swollen clit.

His tongue swirls over the aching bud, taking my breath away. Just as my hips are rolling against his face, I feel something pushing into me.

Oh God yes….

"Mmm," Vaughn rasps, pushing the hilt of his knife deeper into my slick folds. "This slutty little cunt gets so fucking messy for my knife. Is that how you want to get fucked? By a fucking *knife* against the wall of an alley, like a dirty whore?"

My face crumples, my thighs shaking. I can only moan in response.

He slaps my pussy, making it clench around the handle of the hunting knife.

"*I asked you a fucking question, slut*."

"*Yes*!" I sob, my hips bucking and rolling against his face. "*Yes, I want you to fuck me like a dirty whore!*"

“*There’s* my good girl,” he snarls right before his mouth delves back between my thighs. He keeps thrusting the hilt of his knife into me as he sucks my clit between his lips and rolls his tongue over it again and again. Suddenly, my whole body tightens and my throat closes.

“*Oh fuck! Oh fuck! Oh fuuuuuck!*”

I scream as the lightning crashes over me, the orgasm ripping through my core. My hips buck and grind, my body shuddering and my pussy spasming as I come all over his face and his knife.

He slides the knife from my pussy and then rips off his shirt. He stands, shoves my thighs apart, ripping whatever is left of my leggings and my shorts, then centers his swollen cock against my opening.

He hitches my thigh up to his hip and grabs my jaw with the other hand.

“*Scream for me, princess*.”

He rams every fucking thick inch of his huge cock into me just as his mouth crushes to mine. And I do, into his mouth, as he buries himself inside me.

Then, he starts to fuck me like a *beast*.

His muscles clench and coil, his hands gripping me hard enough to leave delicious bruises as he rams into me. His fat cock stretches me to my limit, making me moan and beg for more as he devours my mouth. My back scrapes against the brick with every brutal thrust, sending a mix of pain and pleasure spiraling through my core.

Vaughn grabs my other thigh, and suddenly I’m pinned to the wall, impaled on his huge cock with my legs wrapped around his muscled hips.

“*Now, princess*,” he hisses as he bites my bottom lip. “I’m going to fuck you like the dirty cock slut you are.”

Sweet. Jesus.

He pounds into me like a madman, burying every inch of his cock deep inside me with every violent, unhinged thrust. He tears at my hoodie, yanking it open and literally ripping my t-shirt down the middle. I whimper

when his lips wrap around one aching hard nipple, and when he bites down, I scream in primal pleasure.

We're at each other like fucking animals—biting, scratching, smacking, choking, *thrusting* as Vaughn rams into me again and again, until I'm delirious and clinging to him for dear life. I come again, then a third and fourth time.

It's not enough.

It's *never* enough with him.

"*Harder*," I hear myself choke.

"*Deeper*."

"*Hit me*."

"*Fuck me.*"

"*More. Give me moooore….*"

When I come again, it's like my entire being shatters. My whole body wrenches, my spine arching sharply and my head dropping back against the brick behind me, my fingernails raking down his back as I open my mouth and eyes wide, *moaning* my release into the city sky.

With a groan, Vaughn buries himself to the hilt inside me, his muscles tightening as his big cock twitches, pumping jet after jet of his cum into me.

I'm shaking so much I can barely stand as he slides his dick out of me and lowers me to my feet. I drop to my knees in front of him, looking up at him and shivering.

Fuck, he looks like a monster. A predator, standing there shirtless in the shadows, his black jeans shoved down his hips and his fist wrapped around his huge cock.

I whimper as he pushes it into my mouth, letting me taste myself and him together as he lazily thrusts in and out over my tongue. He slides out of my mouth with a pop, then slaps the heavy head against my lips and my cheeks, smearing cum and spit all over me until I look like a complete slut.

A slut on her knees in an alley, moaning as she looks up at a monster.

Her monster.

Slowly, the monster turns back into the man. He bends down, gently taking my trembling body in his powerful arms and lifting me against his chest, his dark hair sweaty as his icy blue eyes capture mine.

"*You did so well, baby*," he murmurs.

"*You really scared the shit out of me*," I breathe.

His mouth finds mine, kissing me, his tongue pushing in to dance with mine.

"*I love you, princess*," he says quietly.

"*I love you, too, Demon*," I murmur.

And then we go home, him carrying me gently up the alley in the shadow of the Mercury Theater: the beautifully broken ballerina, in the arms of her monster.

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EPILOGUE

EVELINA

"So…" My brows knit as I peer out the window at the dark trees whipping past the Range Rover. "I feel that Andrés wasn't really kidding when he said we were no longer welcome on the Knightsblood campus?"

Which does sort of suck, because I really enjoyed the class I was teaching up here, and I loved my students.

On the plus side, I've been talking to Kir and Madame Kuzmina about starting a class for immediately pre-professional students at the Mercury, and they both seemed to like the idea. Also, a few of my favorite girls from Knightsblood are going to be moving to New York after they graduate this spring, and they *loved* the idea of getting back into the studio together.

"Debatable," Vaughn grunts from the driver's seat. "Also, he's back in Spain doing…whatever the fuck *dynastic* jerk-offs like him do with their time." He grins as he glances at me. "It's not like he's festooning the front gates of the place with our photos and 'do not let in' taped to them."

I giggle. "*Okay*, but still—"

"And anyway, we're not going to campus."

Earlier, he lured me out of the city by saying we were going to go hiking in the Hudson Valley north of the city. Instead, we ended up heading north*east* into southern Connecticut.

We've just had an amazing day in Hawthorne Hollow, the super cute little coastal town down the hill from the cliffs that Knightsblood sits on. We had lunch and then did some antiquing, where I managed to find a gorgeous porcelain figurine of a ballerina for Gordon Stone's wife, Katherine, who collects them.

The Stones have actually become good friends, especially after Vaughn elevated Gordon to an even more senior position within the Syndicate.

I mean, it's the least he could do after everything.

While Jameson Beaumont *was* part of a coup against Vaughn, Gordon, it turns out, was *not*. His only crime was that decades ago, he was one of the members of the upper ranks of the Syndicate who ousted Quentin.

While Vaughn's grandfather was whispering in his ear about enemies and power, he was also using him as a tool for revenge against his own personal enemies from years before. And after everything that happened, Quentin's "proof" against Gordon was proved to be bullshit.

After lunch and antiquing, Vaughn and I still *did* go on a hike, where he pinned me against a tree with my hands above my head and my panties stuffed in my mouth as he fucked me, came all over me, then fucked me a second time with that cum still dripping down my skin until he filled me with a second load.

Hashtag *blessed*.

After that, we had dinner and then watched a girl with an *incredible* voice play acoustic versions of Velvet Guillotine songs in the park in the middle of town.

And now, we're…

"Wait, so where *are* we going?"

He exhales. "It's a *surprise*, princess."

I make a face. "You know I hate surprise—"

I yelp, squealing a little as his hand shoots out to pinch and twist one of my nipples through my top. His hand immediately slides down between my

legs, and I whimper when he rubs my pussy through my jeans.

“Yeah, tell me again how much you hate being surprised,” he smirks as he brings his hand back to the wheel, turning the car off the main road.

I poke my tongue out at him, shifting in my seat at the heat he’s left me with.

When I look out the window, I realize I know where we are. And when the car pulls into the little parking lot next to the clearing that overlooks the town, the campus, and the ocean, I grin.

“Oh man, I don’t think I’ve been to Griswold Hill since—”

“The night I chased you?” he murmurs. He grins at me. “Neither have I.”

He pulls to a stop at the very top and switches off the engine. We get out, and I blink when he pulls a blanket and a bottle of wine out of the trunk.

“Someone came prepared.”

“You have no idea,” he murmurs with a smile.

We lay the blanket down on the moonlit grass and open the wine—no glasses, but who cares. Vaughn sits, and when I settle between his thighs, he pulls me back against his chest and wraps his arms around me. I snuggle and tangle myself up in him as he takes a sip right from the bottle before passing it to me.

I take a drink and pass it back to him. He just sets it to the side before he wraps those big arms around me again.

“There’s something I want to ask you about trying…something I want to *do* with you.” He takes a slow breath. “But it’s a big ask, and I want you to know, the safe word still totally applies.”

Holy shit. I haven’t even *thought* about our safe word in months. But also… what the heck does he want to “try” or “do” that merits reminding me of it? I mean, at this point, listing the things I *haven’t* done with him, sexually speaking, would be faster than listing the ones I have.

“*Okay*,” I blush, sinking into his chest. “A little apprehensive, but curious.”

“Good,” he murmurs into my ear as he reaches a hand behind him. “*I want your everything*.”

His hand is suddenly in front of me again, at eye level.

Holding a small box.

“I want your love, and I want your body. I want that apprehension *and* that curiosity. I want all your yesterdays, todays, and tomorrows, Evelina.”

Oh my God.

His thumb pushes the lid of the small black box open, and the moonlight glimmers off the ring inside.

“I love you more than anything in this world or the next, and I want my life to be your life and yours to be mine,” Vaughn growls into my ear. “*I want you to marry me*.”

There’s no hesitation.

No need to think.

I just whirl, throw my arms around him, and tackle him to the ground.

“*Yes*.”

The ring slips onto my finger.

His mouth crushes to mine.

We scramble to our feet, he chases me, then he catches me as I squeal.

Or maybe it’s me who catches him.

Or maybe we catch each other.

Or maybe it doesn’t really matter, because neither of us is ever letting go.

* * *

The Jaggerverse will continue with **Dark Descendants**, a new next-gen dark college mafia series set in the world of Knightsblood, coming spring 2026.

Join the VIP list to stay in the loop.

Haven't gotten enough of Vaughn and Evelina?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:
https://BookHip.com/FQLHAVF

This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Dance of Monsters.* But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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Broken Lines

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Stalker of Mine

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
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